

Sunday, December 21st 2014

Readings

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

1 After the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, **2** he said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent." **3** Nathan replied to the king, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you." **4** But that night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying: **5** "Go and tell my servant David, 'This is what the LORD says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in?' **6** I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. **7** Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'" **8** "Now then, tell my servant David, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. **9** I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth. **10** And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning **11** and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.'" "The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: **12** When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. **13** He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. **14** I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by human beings, with floggings inflicted by human hands. **15** But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. **16** Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.'" **17** Nathan reported to David all the words of this entire revelation.

Psalms 89:1-4, 19-26

1 I will sing of the LORD's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations. **2** I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself. **3** You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, **4** 'I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations.'" **19** Once you spoke in a vision, to your faithful people you said: "I have bestowed strength on a warrior; I have raised up a young man from

among the people. **20** I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him. **21** My hand will sustain him; surely my arm will strengthen him. **22** No enemy will get the better of him; no wicked person will oppress him. **23** I will crush his foes before him and strike down his adversaries. **24** My faithful love will be with him, and through my name his horn will be exalted. **25** I will set his hand over the sea, his right hand over the rivers. **26** He will call out to me, 'You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior.'

Romans 16:25-27

25 Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, **26** but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to faith and obedience-- **27** to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, **27** to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. **28** The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." **29** Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. **30** But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. **31** You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. **32** He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, **33** and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." **34** "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" **35** The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. **36** Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. **37** For no word from God will ever fail." **38** "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me according to your word." Then the angel left her.

Surprise

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

Over the past month, we've journeyed together from the words of prophecy in the first week of Advent to the exhortation to preparation in the second week. The third week brought us to joy, which we heard was more than a feeling, for joy is an active change, a transformative habit of life. From prophecy to preparation to joy we've come, and now we find ourselves in the place that prophecy foretold, the place for which we prepared, the place that holds our joy: we end up in love.

The fourth Sunday of Advent is Love Sunday. Perhaps this is the most celebrated and yet most misunderstood Sunday in Advent. Celebrated because, well, who doesn't love love? Celebrated because we want to love and be loved. We want to feel loved. We want to know what love is. Yet, all too often, we fail to recognize love when we see it.

This is fairly common phenomenon, at least within film. Movies like the Wedding Singer and the Wedding Planner play on this theme, where someone is all set to get married and doesn't notice their true love right in front of them. The point of these is that, all too often we get caught in a superficial kind of love that we thought we wanted, and that distracts us from the depth of love we truly need.

This tension between want and need is where we find King David in Samuel. It quickly becomes clear that he misunderstands the form and content of God's love. Though he sits established on his throne in Jerusalem as the new ruler of Israel, he finds himself yet restless. He's dissatisfied with his relationship with God. So, of course, David thinks that the problem is not with him, but with God, that what God needs is a temple rather than a tent, a stable house rather than a roaming pavilion. God's tabernacle wasn't enough for David.

Of course, this is David projecting his own desires onto God. After fighting many hard battles, David wanted a place of safety and security. David wanted a walled city to keep out the wild beasts

after having roamed the countryside as a shepherd, vulnerable to attacks. David wanted control, and nothing quite says control like a giant house for all to see. David already had control over his own life, and now, reaching out, he seeks to control God's life as well.

You may have heard the cliché that God made humanity in God's own image, and then we returned the favor. That's one of those things that is funny because it is true. Have you ever noticed how someone's theology often reflects their own preferences? Emperors wanted religious control over the Roman empire, so the revolutionary Christianity became, in their eyes, a state-sanctioned faith. Enlightenment philosophers were consumed by their

thoughts and concepts, so the intimate, personal, embodied God became, in their eyes, a notion, an idea, a source and product of logic and reason well separated from the everyday realities of human life.

The Republican God is quite conservative, and wouldn't you know it, the Democratic God is incredibly liberal. God made us in the divine image, and my oh my, have we returned the favor.

And so did David. Rather than embracing the kind of love God offered, David instead designed the kind of love he wanted from God. Fortunately for David, and fortunately for us, God sees through our ruses and cuts to the quick of the insecurities that we bring as we try to contain God, to control God. Notice God's response: *First, did I ever ask for this?*

Haven't I always been with you in the tabernacle, that tent house that has been with you wherever you go? And further, great king, aren't I the one that made you king in the first place? I gave you this house, so why would I need you to build me one too?

In case you were wondering, that is the Pastor Tucker paraphrase.

And then, God takes it a step further, from confrontation into care. *Listen, God says, don't worry. I will take care of you, and not only you, but all of my people. I will provide a safe place, away from oppression and full of compassion, a home built upon the security of my divine promise. I won't leave you. You will have rest from your enemies, and you will have this forever. Forever."*

It might be easy to romanticize this love Sunday, if it weren't for God just screwing up all our conceptions of love. For David, his idea of love was not only getting the life he wants, but getting the God that he wants as well. God, on the other hand, has a different idea of love. And this love comes wrapped in a tent.

Seriously. There is a particular kind of love that comes in a tent. Throughout the Israelite's wanderings in the wilderness, God was amongst them in the Tabernacle, which was just a big tent used for worship, kind of like a big top, but used for animal sacrifice rather than a three ring circus. In the midst of their homelessness, in the midst of their conflicts, in the midst of their hungers and thirsts, their sicknesses

and their idolatries, God was amongst the Israelites, tenting with them, no matter what. This is the kind of love God committed to all God's people: to be homeless with us, to suffer with us, to wander with us, to be in our wildernesses. That is the kind of God, the kind of love, that comes in a tent.

We, like David, must remember that, while we have found some sense of security doesn't mean all creation is safe and sound. There is still a need for a God who tents with us. Just because we'd rather have a God who looks like us doesn't mean that God's mission to reconcile all things is yet complete. There is still a need for a God who takes on our sufferings. The kind of love God brings to the table is the kind of love that often doesn't have a table, just

a tent and a few stakes, untamed and setting out to be amongst those who are in the deepest need of compassion and companionship.

It is certainly this kind of untamed God who decides to enter the world through a virgin's womb in a Bethlehem stable. Rather than an appearance in an immaculate temple, God instead tabernacles amongst us in a tent of human flesh, taking on our identity of sinfulness and need. If we look to the temple mount on Christmas Eve, we will surely miss the birth of Christ, for he is homeless on that night.

And God chose that! God chose that birth, that woman, that family, that manger, that stable, that image to continue throughout the ages that, rather than a glorious appearing, instead it was an obscure

birth, witnessed by more livestock than people. This is the kind of love that God brings, the kind of love for which we wait.

And no, it is not the love that we want. We want swift victories rather than the patient, painful road to Golgotha. Rather than the God of our best intentions, in Bethlehem we find God once again tenting with us, taking on the very basest of human conditions. Birth. Crying. Helplessness. Need. Yet, this is an immaculate love, for in the midst of this babe is the fullness of the God of the universe. this God who chose a human birth gave birth to all creation, this God who cried in Mary's arms need not have faced the grief of humanity, this God who chose helplessness is the only

one who can help us find salvation, this God in need needed no one and yet chose us.

On Love Sunday, we must let go of the images of God we've created for ourselves, the idols that we've made that fit our perceptions of who God ought to be. Instead we live in the tension of the God who at once is homeless and at home in all creation, grieved and overjoyed in the midst of God's people, helpless in a manger and almighty in salvation. Fully God and fully human. Love is coming, and it looks pretty insignificant. Love, tented in humanity, wrapped in our flesh. Though this may not be the love we wanted, may not be the love we expected, in this child we find all the love we ever need. Amen.