

# “House and Home”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – October 25, 2020*

Reformation Sunday

Psalms 89:1-4, 24-26

Rev. John Wahl

2 Samuel 7:1-14a

I’ll admit it; I watch way too many Home Improvement shows. Even though they tend to be formulaic and a little corny, they hook me in because I want to see the before and after; what it looks like to see the walls come down or the ceilings vaulted. I have noticed that the shows I tend to prefer are the ones that are tailored with the homeowner in mind, rather than just being a “flip;” a faceless, anonymous transaction. Maybe that is because there is a difference between a house – that could be inhabited by just about anyone; and a home – which is a place you truly make your own.

This week, we turn to the story of David: the humble shepherd boy who slays the giant and becomes Israel’s greatest king. When David ascends to the throne after many victories in war, he establishes a new capital in the city of Jerusalem, builds a royal palace there, and brings back the Ark of the Covenant; creating a unified political and religious kingdom.

The scene is set with David in his new home, at rest from the enemies all around him; he is comfortable and content. He lives in a house made of cedar, while the ark of God lives in a tent. That is, David’s dwelling is stable – permanent and secure – while the ark, the symbol of God’s presence, is housed in a moveable and relatively flimsy structure. The implication is that God deserved something better which – in David’s mind – meant something like what he had.

Nathan – a prophet who makes his first appearance in the bible here – responds to King David’s statement in a way uncharacteristic of most prophets, telling David to do whatever he thinks is right; God will be with him. What remains unclear is David’s motivation: did he want to build God a house out of gratitude for all that God had done for him? Or, did David want to give God a temple because he believed that if he did something for God, then God would do more for him? Was he doing this for notoriety, so that David would always be remembered for being the one who built God a temple? Or did David want God to live in a house so he could control who would have access to God?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*

That same night, God comes to the prophet and tells Nathan who God has been and that God doesn't necessarily want the same things that we want. God has never asked for a house; and God never said that David should be the one to build it. In David's time, the people of Israel were no longer living in tents; they had settled down and built houses. God had specifically designed the tabernacle as a sacred space that the people could take down, pack up, and carry to a new location. When the people of God were on the move, so was God. God's "home" was designed to be transient; but now, David didn't want God to be able to move away.

The story of Moses and the Exodus revealed how God works in human history: showing us God as the liberator of the oppressed. And the image of the people of God wandering in the wilderness offers a timeless example of God's people in every age, with each generation making its own pilgrimage from a place of bondage to a Promised Land. The God who heard their calls for liberation, the God who traveled with them through the wilderness, the God who called them to be a new people has never been confined to one place. Now, David wants to contain God within the city of Jerusalem and the temple that he would construct to house God.<sup>2</sup>

But instead of answering David's offer with a yes or no, God provides a different plan. In addition to providing a place for the Israelites to live, and giving them rest from their enemies, God instructs Nathan to tell David that "the Lord will make you a house." David will not only be king, but his reign will be the start of a never-ending dynasty. God will establish a kingdom that will always be ruled by a descendant of David.

God thus changes the equation from any sort of transaction into an unmerited gift. David need not build God a house in order for God to establish David's house. David need not do anything to pay God back before God will do something more for David. God makes it abundantly clear that, in addition to all God has already done for David, God will continue to do more. The temple will come later and, in fact, will be built by David's son, Solomon; but at this point, Solomon has not even been born. There are no prerequisites or conditions for what God promises David. It is unconditional and forever.

It is significant to remember that this story was written down by and for God's people who were living in exile; many centuries after David's reign. The Israelites had been forced to leave Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple had been destroyed. Far from home, they were asking whether God was still with them in a foreign land. This story would remind them that God's presence never left them;

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory Rawn, "A House or a Tent?"

that God was never tied to a particular place. God had traveled with the people before, and God would travel with them again.

We now live in a time when we are currently not able to enter into God's house as we prefer; with our gatherings limited and sanctuaries largely empty. On this Reformation Sunday, maybe we are being reminded that God doesn't need our spaces as much as we do. Though we may prefer to come to worship here in God's house, though we may be content in known habits and traditions; where we are, God is. Wherever we go – or wherever we stay when we do not go where we'd like to go – God will be there.

This is why the image of God's house as a tent or tabernacle might resonate more closely than that of a temple. We believe that the church is not confined to a building but is moveable; much like Jesus on whom the church is modeled – who himself traveled from place to place, searching out people who lived in the shadows and on the margins, loving and accepting them, entering into their homes and encouraging them to repair relationships in their own communities and households.<sup>3</sup> And like Jesus, the church is on the move.

Still, sometimes we do try to build temples for God; confining God to preferred spaces; limiting God to certain traditions, worship styles, and places. Sometimes we try to limit God's place in our lives, seeking to control when and where God can be found. Are we still the people of God when we are at work, or at school, or among our neighbors or friends? Does God travel with us on vacation, or to the football game, or when we sit down to watch TV at night? Is God present when we choose what to spend, or to save, or to give?

In a similar way, we sometimes also try to make transactions with God; offering to give what has not been asked for; presuming to know what God wants from us. Like David, who wanted to build God a house where God could be kept, we may also act with mixed intentions; believing that only if we somehow show our gratitude for what God has done for us will God continue to do more. Nevertheless, it appears that God at least appreciated David's gesture as genuine and gently corrected what may not have come from a pure spirit of generosity.

This should remind us to be attentive listeners to others about their needs; that instead of presuming we know what is best for them – or that their wants would be the same as ours – we would be better served to tailor our giving to their wishes. Much like a house renovation, where the needs and preferences of the homeowner should dictate what changes are made, our giving of gifts – of time or

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<sup>3</sup> Dave Daubert, "A Nimble God"

talent, resource or care – should match the recipient. This requires listening and discernment rather than jumping to conclusions that often match what we prefer.

The grace that God offers us – and grace that we should seek to extend to one another – is not conditional; it is not transactional. God promised to make David into a house that would last forever; a covenant that we believe ultimately created the hope for and fulfilment of a Messiah – Jesus who came to live with us, and reign in us, forever. This gift from God is offered without condition; we need not earn it or pay it back. And yet, as with any gift of blessing, we accept it in order to then share it with others.

In these uncomfortable and uncertain times, maybe as much as any other, we are being called into Reformation. These past months of closures and cancellations, of distancing and delays, are redefining our concepts of house and home. They are also challenging the church to rethink its ideas about attendance and fellowship, sanctuary and outreach. Maybe the time is right for reconsidering how and where God lives and moves; for taking on a renovation project for our concept about what God's place is in our lives. Not because doing so will earn us something more from God, but because it will help us to better share the blessings we receive.

People of God, let us remember that God's gifts are unconditional, that God's promises are eternal, and that God's grace is never-ending. As the church and its people, we therefore offer all thanks and praise to God. Amen.