

Sunday, December 20, 2020
Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year B)

2 Samuel 7.1-11, 16; Luke 1.26-38

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/524886064522726/videos/438883913939190>

(Sermon begins at about 13:15)

“Where God Chooses to Dwell”

Here on the fourth Sunday of Advent, we take up the subject of God’s choice of dwelling places. We start with our Old Testament reading from Second Samuel, in which the prophet Nathan delivers a message from God to King David. David has ascended to the throne, succeeded in uniting the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and established Jerusalem as the capital of the United Monarchy. David reasons that since he now has a nice palace built of cedar, it is not right that God should still be living in a tent. You see, during the time the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, there was a designated tent, the tent of the meeting, where the Ark of the Covenant containing the tablets of the Ten Commandments was kept. The tent of the meeting was essentially the place of worship during the 40-year wilderness journey. As such, this tent was thought to be the place where God lived. Some 200 years later, since arriving in the Promised Land, God continued to live in the tent. David figured it was now time to build God a proper home.

In the oracle we heard today, God basically nixes that idea. He never complained about not having a house to live in. In fact, in his communication with Nathan, God basically just changes the subject. God does finally get back around to it, but in a verse not contained in today’s reading, where God says that one of David’s offspring will be the one to build God a home. We know that it would be David’s son Solomon who would be given the honor of constructing the temple in Jerusalem. Until then, God would be fine continuing to live in a tent. Of course, we know that God did not actually live in a tent. Or in the temple after it was built by Solomon. But that was the understanding at the time.

The oracle we heard in our Old Testament reading was not just about God’s physical address. More importantly, it was also a declaration of God’s favor with David and how God would establish a dynasty that would rule Israel forever. Of course, that all ended about 400 years later with the Exile. But the idea of the Davidic dynasty would remain an image of the longed-for ideal of what Israel would ultimately return to. And an image of what God’s kingdom on earth would be like. To the point that God would eventually send his anointed one, the Messiah, who, it was thought, would be of the line of David and who would be a great king in the model of David.

Fast forward a thousand years from the time of King David. God is looking for a new address. This time, it won’t be a tent. It won’t be a temple made of stone. God has decided that to best connect with his people, to be in relationship with them, he needs to be able to live among them in physical form. This means becoming incarnate, coming in the flesh, becoming human. Now I supposed that God, being God, could just whip up a human body out of thin air and

inhabit that. But there is more to this plan than just walking around for a while in a human shell. God determined that to truly be in relationship with his people, to truly be able to relate to them and to experience what they experience—to relate to us and to experience what we experience—he would actually need to become human. And to get the full picture, the full experience, he would need to experience everything humans do. From the moment of birth to the moment of death, and everything in between. To do that he would need to be born of a human woman.

Which brings us to our Gospel reading and the story of the Annunciation. Of the archangel Gabriel coming to Mary in a little secluded town in Galilee called Nazareth. Why an out-of-the-way village instead of a major city like Jerusalem, we don't know. I suppose that if God wanted to have a human experience, he would go all in and want as gritty of a human experience as possible. Life in a poor, backwater town where he could truly experience the struggles many humans have to endure just to eke out an existence. That would be a more authentic and representative experience of humanity than being born into a wealthy and powerful family.

And why Mary, of all the girls in Nazareth, of all the girls in Israel? The story of the Annunciation gives us a pretty good idea of why Mary was chosen for this most sacred of tasks—to give birth to the Son of God. Of giving birth to God in human form. The Eastern Christian tradition more fully reflects the magnitude of what Mary was chosen to do in giving here the title of *Theotokos*—the God-bearer.

When Gabriel visits Mary, he greets her with the words “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you” (Lk 1.28). Some ancient authorities even add “Blessed are you among women.”¹ Giving a cryptic indication that she has something special that sets her apart from your average first century Jewish girl. Interestingly, Mary does not seem to be rattled by the sudden appearance of a heavenly messenger. Rather, “she was much perplexed by his words” (Lk 1.29), referring to this specific greeting. We don't know why she was perplexed by these words, but we can assume it was because of her humility. That she did not see that there was anything special about her. Certainly nothing that would make her particularly favored by God or that would make her blessed among women. This profound and authentic humility would be incredibly important in the bearing and raising of God incarnate. You don't want the mother of God running around bragging about who she is and what she has done. Besides, people would just think her a whack job.

Not only that, we know that Jesus himself had great humility. As we see throughout the Gospels and as Paul so eloquently put it, “though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil 2.6-8). This humility would have been critical to God having an authentic human experience. Again, you can't go around proclaiming, “Look at me, I'm God in the flesh.” Jesus would have had to have learned such qualities somewhere. Most likely from his mother, since mothers were the primary teachers. So right off the bat, Mary has a critical quality if this God-in-human-form project was going to be a success.

The other quality that seems to have been in her favor in being selected for this sacred duty was her profound faithfulness. After Gabriel describes what God wants from her, how this is going to happen, and who her son is going to be—the Messiah—Mary does not run screaming from the room. She does not protest or argue. Her question “How can this be?” was not an argument, but rather her seeking clarification. Natural under the circumstances. She wanted to understand the full extent of what was being asked of her. Once she understood that, she merely responded with “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Lk 1.38a).

That response says so much about her faithfulness to God. Sure, like most people of her time, she would have been knowledgeable about scripture. About the story of salvation history and the ancient prophecies about how a messiah would come to lead God’s people into the next stage of that history. Conceptually, what was being proposed—the birth of the Messiah—was not hard to grasp. It was what the people had been waiting for, for centuries. It was what the people had yearned for, for centuries. Of course she wants to see it happen. And being a devout Jew, she would have wanted to do her part. But this ask was huge. I’m sure that throughout this exchange with Gabriel she could not have helped but think about what this would mean. How what was being asked would radically alter her life. And what a monumental responsibility this would be. Not just giving birth to the Son of God, but raising him. Being responsible for his care and wellbeing, for his education and upbringing. And despite all that, despite the magnitude and weightiness of what was being asked of her, she firmly and confidently proclaims “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” A simple sentence that spoke volumes about her trust in God. About her faith in what he was seeking to accomplish. Without regard for her own hopes and dreams. Her God needed her and had faith in her. That was all she needed to know. She was all in.

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” A simple sentence that changed the life of a simple peasant girl from a tiny, secluded village in the middle of nowhere. A simple sentence that changed the world.

Two thousand years later, that same simple sentence still has the power to change the world. God continues to come to his people asking for help. Asking them—asking us—to be his hands and his feet and his heart in the world. To be the Body of Christ in the world. God needs us and has faith in us. He doesn’t always send heavenly messengers. His tactics tend to be more subtle these days. But God comes to us nonetheless, in his ongoing quest to find new places to dwell. Not content to dwell in a tent or in a temple of stone, but rather seeking to dwell in our hearts and in our minds, in our words and in our actions.

God continually invites us to be God-bearers. To be dwelling places for his Spirit, for his love. May we have the humility and the faith of Mary to accept God’s invitation. And the courage to proclaim with her: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

¹ *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1852, footnote b.