

“Home for the King”

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38

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In January of 2014, Erin and I had the opportunity to visit Israel. Of all the holy sites, one of the ones that I most looked forward to seeing was the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. This is the place where tradition says that Mary and Joseph went the night that Jesus was born. This is where the stable was, this is where the manger was, this is where the one we worship was born into the world. Bethlehem itself was nothing like what I expected. It is a Palestinian city on the West Bank and its people are a mix of Christian and Muslim. Of course, it has a bustling tourist trade with people from all over the world. It was exciting to be there, but to get to the manger site, one must walk through a very large church that is built over the site where Jesus was born. Inside are lots of candles and paintings and gold covered ornaments. And then get in line with the crowd and you descend into a very small grotto, where there is a star inlaid into the tiles on the floor and that is the place that Mary is supposed to have given birth. You get about a minute there before the crowds start pressing behind you and so you take a couple of quick pictures and make way for another excited pilgrim. I don't know quite what I expected, but I didn't hear any angels singing or feel any spiritual confirmation in my heart that this is where God had come to earth in a small, helpless baby.

It was a different experience altogether when we visited Nazareth. This is the city in Galilee, now part of Israel, where Jesus grew up and lived most of his life. But as we arrived there, it hadn't really occurred to me that this was also the city of the Annunciation. This is where the angel Gabriel brought the news to a young woman named Mary that she was going to bear a

miraculous child. We went to visit the church of the Annunciation. Actually it turns out that there are two churches of the Annunciation, each one dependent on a different tradition. There is an Eastern Orthodox church built over the site of the town well because in Eastern Tradition the angel came to Mary when she went to get water for her family. The second church of the Annunciation is a Roman Catholic church built where traditions says that Mary lived with her parents. Again this is a church where you enter and wind your way down to a small area that was supposed to be Mary's house. This is where I felt it. Not in the church of the Nativity, not even in the church of the Holy Sepulcher where Jesus was raised, not on the Mount of the Beatitudes, not in Capernaum in the house of Peter and Andrew. This is where I was driven to my knees with the knowledge in my own spirit, that this was a place where heaven had touched earth, this was a place where a messenger from God had come. And more than that, this was a place where a human being, one not too different from me had responded, "Let it be to me according to your word." Let it be.

What if she had said, "no?" Did you ever think of that? Notice that the angel does not tell her, "The Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you are bearing a child." No, Gabriel says, "will come" in the future tense. He's telling her what will happen to her, God does not compel her, he gives her the choice. So, what if she says no? I suppose God would have chosen someone else, but history would certainly be different, wouldn't it? But isn't that how God works? Doesn't God look for dwelling place in human lives, in the human heart? When David wants to build God a house, God says no. I wonder if God says no because he is not willing to be limited to one place in the world, even a place as holy as Jerusalem. Both the prophet Nathan and the angel Gabriel speak about the throne of David and his kingdom. They both speak in a way about a dwelling place for God, a house for the king, a home for God. Where is that home? Is it a temple

in Jerusalem? Is it a house in Nazareth or Bethlehem? Where does God dwell? Of course we can say that God is everywhere, but there is something special about a place where God makes his home. Maybe it's in Jerusalem, maybe in the womb of a young woman. Maybe it's the intersection of where God's spirit and the human heart come together. Maybe that's what I felt that day in Nazareth. This was not just a place where an angel came, this was a place where an angel came and a woman said "yes." That's a powerful intersection. That's where God lives, in places and in people where the throne of the king is in their hearts. The house of God, the house of the king is in us, when we say "yes" to God when he comes to each of us, calls us to be part of his kingdom and we say "yes."

It is a choice. God doesn't compel us. It is a choice we make to belong to God, to believe in God, to be part of the kingdom of heaven or not. Rabbi Rami Shapiro says:

"Will you engage this moment with kindness or with cruelty, with love or with fear, with generosity or scarcity, with a joyous heart or an embittered one? This is your choice and no one can make it for you. If you choose kindness, love, generosity, and joy, then you will discover in that choice the Kingdom of God, heaven, nirvana, this-worldly salvation. If you choose cruelty, fear, scarcity, and bitterness, then you will discover in that choice the hellish states of which so many religions speak. These are not ontological realities tucked away somewhere in space—these are existential realities playing out in your own mind. Heaven and hell are both inside of you. It is your choice that determines just where you will reside."¹

It is also our choice where God resides. The Kingdom of God arrives when Mary says yes. It also arrives when you say yes. Yes to love, yes to this child baptized today, yes to one another. It is your choice where God dwells. It is your choice where the house of our king is. It is your choice to be part of heaven or not. Heaven is inside of you—when you choose to love, when you choose to say yes to God. Let it be.

1 Shapiro, Rabbi Rami, *The Sacred Art of Lovingkindness: Preparing to Practice*. Xi-xii