

II Samuel 7:1-14a
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After all we've experiences in the last year and a half, I know lots of us have a new appreciation for our church building. Now you may know that churches have architecture that belong only to churches. The room you came in through the front doors is called a narthex. Do you have a narthex in your home? We don't either. The area in which you are sitting is called the nave. Up these steps is called the chancel and then you get to this area behind the altar. Now do you know what is up here? I think these red curtains have hung here since the early 1950s, but do you know what is behind them? When Allie Steele was about 4 years old she told her mother that behind the curtain is where God was. That seems funny now, but actually it's a pretty human response. We like to locate God. He's up here behind the curtain, or he's up there behind the clouds, or he's here in my heart. It makes it easier for us to think about God if we can locate him somewhere in space. We like to make a box for God, a place where we can keep him. We want God to be predictable, we want God to be like us, to like the things and people that we like. We want to be able to know how God will act, or even tell God how he should act. We want to build a place for God.

David felt that, too. So when his kingdom was secure, and he had already built a house for himself, he decided that it was time to build a house for God. Up until this time, the ark of the Covenant, which was as close as they could come to a representation of where God was, was kept in a tent. All the time they had been in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, all the time of Joshua during the conquest of the land, all the time of the Judges, up until David's time, for hundreds of years the Ark of the Covenant had not had a building, but was kept in a tent. Now David wants to build a temple, a home for God. But what does God tell him? "I have not lived in a house all these years. Why build one now? What are you wanting to do David? Are you the one to build me a house?" Why do you think that David wants to build a home for God? Why would he want to build a temple? As we've looked at the story of David over the last six weeks, we've seen that David is a man with mixed motivations. Is he a good

king or a sinful man? As we said last week, David is a lot like us. In this instance, does David want to honor God by building a Temple to which all the people can come and worship the Lord? Or does David want to locate God to one specific place and therefore limit God? Don't we try to do that too? When we locate God in the heavens, does he then have any interest in the things of earth? If we locate him in our heart, is there some doubt whether or not he is also in your heart, or the heart of the guy up the street, or the person of a different color or religion? If God is up here behind the curtain or here in this church, can we then come to worship him here and then leave and not think about him the rest of the week? If David located God in a new temple in Jerusalem, could he then leave him there when he left Jerusalem for other places? But the temple eventually was built there in Jerusalem, right? And ever since then, Jerusalem has been considered one of the holy places in our world. Revered as the location of the Temple for Jews, as the place where Jesus died and was resurrected for Christians, as the place of Mohammad's night journey for Muslims. A holy city in the Holy Land. You all remember that Erin and I were fortunate to visit Israel several years ago and to visit many holy places. There was one day we were there that was full of amazing experiences. We had been several days in Bethlehem, but we left there to drive to Jericho, down by the Jordan River. Jericho is perhaps the oldest inhabited city in the world. We drove from there to Ein Gedi an oasis near the Dead Sea, the lowest place on the surface of the earth. We stopped at Qumran where during the time of Jesus a sect of Jews lived an austere life but kept alive many early writings of Judaism and the Hebrew Scriptures. We visited Masada, the mountain top fortress where the Jews held out against the Roman Legions during the Jewish rebellion in the decades following the death of Jesus. After a long day we drove through the southern desert to Arad, a small city at the edge of the Negev desert. And after all those holy places, places that had been visited by Jesus, by David, by Joshua, it was there in the desert that I most felt the presence of God. All of a sudden it occurred to me that the God of the Bible was a desert God. The Lord had led Abraham out into the wilderness. He had appeared in a dream to Jacob as he slept with his head on a rock in the desert. Elijah didn't hear the voice of God until he was out in a cave in the

Sinai desert. When Jesus went to prepare for his public ministry, he went out into the wilderness for forty days. In ancient days this was not a god of cities and temples, but of the desert and the open sky. This was not a God who was located somewhere, this was the Lord who was everywhere. The ark was kept in a tent so it could be moved around, symbolic that God was not limited to one place.

So God tells him “no.” But in telling him no, he tells David that God instead will build a house, a dynasty for David, but he lets him in on a secret. All the time, this has not been about David. All the problems that David had been through, all the help that God had given to him, was not to help out David. We've spent six weeks telling the story of David, but it's not the story of David at all. Professor Patricia Tull who was one of the leaders on our trip to Israel writes about this passage:

*“It will not be David who establishes God, but God who will establish David—and this is not for David’s sake. Rather, God has given him peaceful sovereignty for the sake of the nation, to “plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly” (v. 10). In other words, God has been with David, not because of the virtues he brings to leadership, but so that God’s hopes for the people, great and small, might come to fruition.”*¹

These stories about David have, in a very real way, been stories about God. Almost the last thing God says to David through Nathan is a promise of his steadfast love. In Hebrew that is the word “*hesed*”. It is the word that perhaps is the word that most characterizes God in the Hebrew Scriptures: steadfast love, loyalty, covenant faithfulness (B. Anderson). These stories have been about how God is making a home for his people Israel and how God is loving and faithful, many times in spite of what people do. David is good at times and fails at times. He can be loving and he can be manipulative. He can be faithful and adulterous. But God is always good, God is always loving, God is always faithful. God pulls David through in spite of himself because God wants to use him to build a secure home for God's people.

1 Tull, Patricia. *Feasting on the Word, Supplemental Essays, Year B.*

So if that's true, where does God dwell? Where is God's home? When I first began ministry as a pastor, I had no idea what I was doing. I was 25 years old and had just been ordained as the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Ashland, Kansas. I had done about 4 sermons in my life. I had never done a funeral or a wedding or moderated a session meeting. How was I going to know what to do? I called one of my first mentors, Dick Gronhovd, who had been the pastor of Whitworth Community Presbyterian Church in Spokane, Washington. I had worked as a youth intern at that church while I was in college. After I called him in a panic, Dick laughed and said he would send me all the notes on how he did a funeral and a wedding and communion and moderating meetings. When they arrived a few days later in the mail, included with them was this wooden cross. Engraved on one side is the reference, Ephesians 2:19: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God." I still wear that cross sometimes and always think of the gracious folks who gave it to me. I also remember that the passage continues, "with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." God has build a dwelling place, a household, a home. It's us. He builds us together into that place, so we may say, "here, here is where God is."

Barbara Brown Taylor, the Episcopal priest and preacher and writer, eventually left her church and began to teach at a college. For a while she struggled at being a congregant and not a priest, and struggled to find where God was.

After she left her church, what she discovered-- "As I became a sojourner in congregations where I had no official role, I began to understand that while I had lost institutional power, I was still a priest. No longer tied to one particular community, I began to sense myself part of the far larger congregation of humankind. No longer responsible for one particular altar, I began to see altars everywhere. . . .

Gradually I remembered what I had known all along which is that church is not a stopping place but a

starting place for discerning God's presence in the world.”² The church is not a stopping place. This building is not a home for God, no building is. I think we've discovered some of that during the time when could not meet together in one place. But we found that we are a spiritual gathering place, a spiritual building. This bulding is one we treasure, for it is where God's people gather and we discern God's presence because God is with us, and God goes with us. This is the starting place, but as we go out into the world because in a special way, we are the dwelling place for God.

2 Taylor, Barbara Brown. *An Altar in the World*. 2009