

"I Will Build You a House"
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
Edina Morningside Community Church; October 23, 2016

2 Samuel 7:1-17

Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you."

But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will 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, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever. In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

Today I have been your pastor for all of six and a half weeks. It's a little hard to believe, since it already feels like I've been here for a lot longer. Then again, the fact that I'm still figuring out our sound system, and where to stand on Sunday morning, proves that I've not yet fully graduated from the "baby pastor" phase.

I think the reason I feel more nested than six weeks would suggest is what we have already done together. We've organized community outreach efforts like door-knocking, put together a powerful Rally Sunday experience, began our fall program and preschool activities, cared for not one but two families through recent funerals, welcomed the whole community to a big installation service, launched the fall pledge drive, started months-out worship planning with Elaine, and oriented new members who plan to join next Sunday. Special meetings also continue for a governance task force, the search for our next permanent Music Director, and getting organized in advance of a capital campaign. I even got a few boxes unpacked, and with Mary Engelke's help have managed to not kill *all* my office plants. Whew! Friends and colleagues ask how it's going here at Edina Morningside Church, and I've been telling them it's a "cannonball" entry, in the diving sense. I've jumped with both feet, gotten in over my head, and now am coming up for air, searching for equilibrium. At least I hope it's a cannonball, and not a belly-flop.

Here's something I've noticed, though, when I hear myself talking about all that's going on. I put *myself* in the subject line more often than not. If I'm not careful, I can be caught in the idolatry of thinking that

I'm responsible for the whole work and mission of the church. Like David, I can presume that God needs me to build the temple, and not the other way around.

David is the "golden king" in Hebrew tradition, the one who manages to unite all twelve tribes, then defeat the Philistines and other enemy armies. He makes mistakes along the way as any flawed human being does, but he's known for a devotional sensibility reflected in some of the Psalms. Most of all he loves God and wants to do God's will. This is why when he consolidates power in Jerusalem, he brings the Ark of the Covenant with him. The Ark is a physical manifestation of God's presence, so when David marches it to Jerusalem in a great liturgical parade, he goes before it, dancing with joy and not caring what people think of him. His heart for God is on display, and David is at his finest.

But then David takes it upon himself to build God a house. Having built his own palace with fine cedar in Jerusalem, David thinks that God needs such a palace as well, an ornate temple. Whereas the Ark of the Covenant used to travel wherever the people went in a movable tent called the tabernacle, David insists that God should now have a permanent address. It just so happens that the temple would be in Jerusalem as well, making sure that the whole nation of Israel would look in just one direction for all their political and religious needs. David has multiple reasons for building this temple, and it has little to do with God's own preferences.

God's priorities become clear in the message for the king that comes to the prophet Nathan in the middle of the night. *Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel...saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"* In other words, God has no need of a zip code. This same God who says "don't make graven images or idols of me to tie me down" prefers to be understood as out and about, alongside the people *wherever* they go.

Yet instead of judging David harshly, God takes the king's intentions and reverses them. "I will build *you* a house", God says. God insists on being the one in the subject line, the one whose grace and action inspires everything that David or any other person would do in response. Furthermore, what God promises to build is no house of stone and cedar, but a house of divine presence, protection and progeny. The spiritual house that God promises to build around, through and beyond King David is for all the people of Israel, "*so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more... and I will give you rest from all your enemies.*" The house that God builds is a whole people wrapped in righteousness, which extends beyond any one person or lifetime. God commits to generation after generation after generation of parental care, guidance and correction. *That* is the house which *God* builds, far exceeding anything David could hope to do by his own power. Its permanence comes not in brick and mortar, nor in the accomplishments of any individual or time, but in the abiding promise of God's eternal presence.

I need to hear God's gentle corrective about this right now, when I'm just a bit too enamored with my new role in the church's life. But I also wonder if this is a timely reminder to *all* of us that God prioritizes people and community over a building. I say so because we are at the start of what will be an intense period of work on this brick and mortar place. As longtime members and leaders know, months ago the congregation approved action to rebuild our crumbling chimney and reconstruct the entire east wall. Scaffolding has started to wrap around the building, and before long the stone exterior of the wall will be carefully removed. At the same time, a temporary structure will go up inside to hold the weight of the lower level, library and third floor while the east wall is pulled back into alignment and attached again. We want the building to remain safe for our members and all the groups that gather here, but interruption and inconvenience will bring headaches for weeks—maybe months—to come. Your leaders have already put significant energy into getting this far, but the whole church will need still more forbearance to see the project through.

So what are we to make now of God's promise to David and his descendants, saying "I will build you a house"? I hear in that a caution. Before we get too far down the road of our own priorities and plans, we do well to ask, what are the priorities of *God* among us? As David learns, God is not primarily interested in monumental buildings; God calls us to faithful community first. Buildings may well *serve* that community, just as a temple was later built for the people by David's son Solomon. But the building of a timeless house that God does among us starts with human hearts. You have named this already in your mission statement, which speaks of "a vibrant home for spiritual exploration and growth, where we care, learn, create, and serve with each other in times of joy and in times of challenge." *That* is the spiritual house which God builds among us, and serving *that* purpose is why we undertake such necessary physical repairs.

When we trust ourselves to God's spiritual building, we will find our part in the community as well. The writer of 1 Peter gives us an image for this, writing: "Come to [God], a living stone... chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:4-5). How are you a living stone, being molded, shaped, and fit into the spiritual house of God? Are you the living stone of welcome for new guests, helping them be at ease in God's house? The living stone of kindness for the young, nurturing faith, hope and love that will abide long after we pass? The living stone of remembrance for homebound folks who cannot attend as often? The living stone of comfort for those who grieve? The living stone of safe harbor for the families and children who attend our preschool? The living stone of cheerfulness for the people who walk by the church? The living stone of mercy for those who stand holding cardboard by the side of the road? The living stone of service for so many needs that arise? The living stone of despair, holding silent lament for all that is broken within and without? The living stone of protest for changing what does not honor God in this world? The living stone of joy in music, poetry, nature and silence? The living stone that feels out of place, trying to trust that God will find the fit that's right? The living stone that connects us to other communities by your traveling presence?

By the eternally-creative grace of God, we are each here as living stones, chosen and precious in God's sight, "sanctuaries of the Holy Spirit,"¹ to be built into a spiritual house and a vibrant home. This is the promise of God to King David and we who follow after him. This is the legacy that God calls forth from us. This is the purposeful community of God's spiritual house, helping us understand best how to provide for this house of stone and steel.

Let us pray: *God of grace, you promised to build David a household great among the nations. Then you sent your son, Jesus, to transform this world so that all people are one in the great household of God. Show us how to serve as your living stones in the name of Jesus Christ, who will one day welcome us all home. Amen.*"²

¹ Phrase from William Martin, *The Art of Pastoring: Contemplative Reflections* (Pittsburgh: Vital Faith Resources, 1994), 80.

² Prayer adapted from WorkingPreacher.org.