

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

If I Had a Hammer

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

¹Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ²the 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."³Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you."

⁴But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: ⁵Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? ⁶I 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. ⁷Wherever 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?" ⁸Now 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; ⁹and 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. ¹⁰And 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, ¹¹from 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. ¹⁶Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord

People: Thanks be to God.

Gone are the days of bands with fifteen acoustic guitars and twenty-four part harmony. We haven't seen the likes of Peter, Paul, and Mary, or The New Christy Minstrels (I've often wondered what happened to the Old Christy Minstrels), for some time now, but folk music lives on in my soul. I've heard it blowing in the wind that this land IS our land, and Joe Hill is still alive as you and me. The Second Samuel reading today reminded me of Pete Seeger's hammer. That hammer never drove a nail but it drove a movement to better the world we inherited. Besides, I know three guitar chords and most folk songs can be sung in the key of G.

People have told me that the Bible never contradicts itself, yet here we see a fateful contradiction. David wanted to build a big worship center right there in his capitol;

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a sort of National Cathedral. It had political ramifications that David's son, Solomon, took advantage of. Honestly a reader has to ask a question: What happened to the God who was satisfied with a revival meeting tent? Solomon decided to build God a palatial temple and we are told God happily moved in. Prior to that, the people of Israel worshipped God in many places and later we find the Samaritans busy still doing that. If God had been happy to live in an upscale neighborhood of Jerusalem we wouldn't be people of faith today.

Some conservative Christians are positive Jewish people universally want to tear down the Dome of the Rock and put up a massive building with an altar to fricassee cows on. In the end history has proven God was right in the first place. The temple and its politics became irrelevant to the faith of millions following its total destruction by the Romans in 70 AD. This horrible act did not kill Judaism and it gave new life to Christianity.

The question of what God wants was best settled by the prophets who arose to answer the question, "where has God gone when his house was destroyed?" The tent was a much better image of where God dwells. It is portable and open. The tent cannot be defended with gates and bastions. Any old body can sneak in under the flaps and visit the resident. Aside from driving in a few pegs a hammer isn't much use in a tent. This is not how we build a house for God because God already has a place to live. The rich and famous with homes in Camelot, Saint Marie, Xanadu, and Atlantis have nothing on God who dwells in the best real-estate known to humans, the human heart. God is not a God of place, but of every place. We may need shelter to gather in worship, but we are God's shelter.

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When the angel announces the imminent arrival of Jesus, he calls the child “Emmanuel” – God with us. David’s lament that he lives in a fancy palace while God is out in the garden shed missed one important fact. God in David was there in the great cedar palace – by the way, cedar in the Middle East is not the aromatic wood your mother stored her trousseau in. God was also in the hovel of the least important serf on the poorest patch of land.

You want to build a house for God? You need the kind of hammer Pete Seeger sang about and maybe a bell of freedom and a song about love.

Closing Prayer: Who are we, Lord God, that you should come to us? Yet you have visited your people and redeemed us in your Son. As we prepare to celebrate his birth, make our hearts leap for joy at the sound of your word, and move us by your Spirit to bless your wonderful works. We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose day draws near, your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.