

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

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

The Word of God for the People of God.

Thanks be to God.

I know what you're thinking. It's December 21st. Three days until Christmas Eve. Just three little days. Come on. The poinsettias are out. The tree is lit. Vacation time has started. The carols are going full blast. Come on. Are you really going to preach on Second Samuel? Isn't it time for Joseph and Mary yet? The innkeeper? The holiday rush has just about reached peak speed, and the feverish frenzy is really going round about like a whirling dervish. Isn't it time now for the church to get to Christmas?

I saw a church sign just yesterday, that read "Christmas at such-and-such Church, Sundays @ 9 and 11 a.m." And I thought, "Huh. Don't they know Christmas is on Thursday?" It seems that for that church, Christmas has already begun.

But I suggest to you today, on this December 21st, this Sunday that is not, in fact, Christmas, that perhaps the best thing for your soul and my soul in the next three days, is a bit more waiting.

At risk of being repetitive, I'll remind you that historically, for Christians, Advent--this season before Christmas--is considered a "little lent." In this four weeks before Christmas Advent invites us to wait. To pause. To acknowledge the promise that Christ's birth opens for us the possibility of a new world, but also to acknowledge that we are still waiting for that promise to be fulfilled, and that in our lives as Christians, we are called to lean towards that fulfillment--to yearn and long for it with the fervor with which young children long for Christmas. Advent calls us to remember that we are a people waiting for Jesus to come again, to set the world right, to fill the empty spaces in our hearts and our relationships, to heal what is broken and restore those who have been lost. And Advent calls our lives back to the work of preparing for that day, when God will be with us.

David was king of Israel in a time when God had been with God's people in a very special way. God had moved with all of Israel from the time when they escaped Egypt through the sea. God had packed God's bags and hurried along with them, a personal guide as they wandered the wilderness, as they entered the promised land, as they established a nation. God's presence had been carried along, leading them, guiding them, moving sometimes in spite of them as they went. And now, God is there with them as they have established a kingdom. We pick up just a couple of chapters after David has taken over as King of Israel, and he is setting down roots in a new city, in what will be the new capital of this holy nation, the city of Jerusalem. David has just built a palace for himself first, and then it hits him. "My Lord! Here I am in this nice cedar house, and God is still out in the tent! I better build a house for God." He runs the idea by his personal prophet, Nathan, and Nathan seems to think it's a good idea--"Sure, go for it. God's pretty much good with whatever you want to do."

Well, Nathan was wrong. God's got other ideas.

It's a classic story. Man finds the source of the greatest power. Think of the Lord of the Rings, where the greatest power is held by whoever holds the ring. Man seeks to hold on to, to tame or claim that source of power for himself. Let me

build you a house, Lord, and you just stay right here, and we'll let you know when we need you.

David seems to be deciding for God, rather than following God. He seems to be advising his prophet--the prophet is meant to be the mouthpiece of God, like a megaphone, but David seems to be treating the prophet more like God's hearing aid. David seems to think it's a good idea, to pin God down.

God does not think it's such a good idea. "Oh really? You think it's up to you, huh? Ever since we started this thing, I've been in a tent--just like everyone else. And did you see me asking for a house? Have I ever asked for a house?"

David's plan is, at best, misguided. He loves God, and he wants God to be present to Israel forever, and a temple, a house for the Lord, is just the way to do it, or so it seems to David. If the saying were ever true, it's true now: My thoughts are not your thoughts, says the Lord. My ways are not your ways. God is determined for David and the people to see that God's presence with us does not depend on whether we have built God a house--whether we have done the right thing in just the right way, whether we have fixed up the guest room for God to stay, no God is with us because God is determined to be with us, because God has promised to be with us. We don't even have to ask; God is there. It's what we Methodists call prevenient grace, grace before we even knew we needed it.

God's style has not been a cedar house, but, rather, a tent--a dwelling as insecure as the dwellings of God's people in the wilderness. A home that is just as subject to the elements as our own lives are, just as battered by the wind and storms that we endure. God is there with us, not holed up in a bunker.

God's presence, you see, is housed in God's promise. "Moreover," God says to David, "I will make you a house." Now, listen to what God says here--God isn't offering to build a 3 bedroom - 2 bath ranch for David, no, God doesn't say, "I will make a house FOR you," but rather, "I will make YOU INTO a house." I will make you a house--a house and a kingdom that will be forever before me; a dynasty that will be established forever.

You see, God makes a house, a dwelling, in the most unexpected places. How could he have known? How could David have known what God would do? How

could he have known that one day, nearly a thousand years later, there would be a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph--Joseph, of the house of David? How could he have known that God would set up the tent and dwell in that virgin's womb, before coming as the babe who would rule God's everlasting kingdom?

As it turns out, our God is a God who disregards expectations--both David's and ours. Even the faithful are surprised, as we will see next week with Simeon. We who think we know how God works, what God wants, where God shows up, we above all find ourselves befuddled again and again. If you need a reminder that God will surprise you, just read Mary's magnificat again and take it seriously--this is a God who intends to, or according to Mary, who has already brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly, who has filled the hungry up and sent the rich away empty. If you aren't confounded yet, then you better prepare yourself.

Prepare yourself.

That's it. It's what John the Baptist has been yelling about all through Advent. Prepare the way of the Lord. Prepare the way of the unexpected, undomesticated, untamed God, the God of surprise. Don't build a house for this God--no, this God is on the move, so you better prepare yourself to keep up. Repent, John says. Sit with yourself for long enough to root out the sin that preoccupies you; shed the things that cloud your vision and muffle your ears to the truth. Remember those wise men? They had to have keen eyes to follow a certain star to find him. Sharpen your eyes so that you'll be able to see God in the most unexpected of places, because that's where God makes a home. Clear out your ears so that you'll hear like the shepherds and know that the angel's song is true. Be cleansed of your expectations, especially if you expect God to do the same old thing, or nothing at all.

It's a lot to do in three days, friends--to prepare, to repent, to be cleansed, to turn in the direction of following God. Three days isn't a lot of time. But you only have to remember back to Easter to recall that God can do quite a lot in three days. I pray that for you, in these three days, that God would find you in moments of pause, in hours of waiting, that you, like Mary, might believe God's promise and find that God is present, that God has made a home, within you.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.