

Sermon | Advent 4

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 | Luke 1:26-38 The Rev. Barnabas Pusunur December 24, 2023

Christmas is almost at the door. As the sun sets today, we'll be gearing up to celebrate the birth of our savior Jesus Christ. The birth of hope, joy and salvation! We'll be celebrating God coming down to earth as a human to live among us.

God making a dwelling among his creation.

The Bible often talks of God dwelling with people. In the Old Testament times, God dwelt among them in the form of the ark of the covenant. This was a sacred chest which contained the tablets of the covenant that God made with Israel through Moses. This chest was made with acacia wood and was overlaid with gold both inside and outside. There was also a cover to this chest which was called a mercy seat with two angels or cherubim on both sides of the cover.

The ark of the covenant symbolized God's most concrete presence among the Israelites. It was a presence that was powerful, mysterious, and terrifying. The Israelites carried the ark of the covenant constantly with them. They depended on it. Its mysterious power was the key to their victories.

Until the time of David, when there was no temple, the ark of the covenant was placed in a tent like structure called the tabernacle. In this tabernacle it was kept in the most inner sanctum- called the holy of holies. This is where God's presence dwelt. This was the closest one could get to the creator of the universe, to the infinite, to the all-powerful, to the

mysterious. God had made a home with the Israelites in the ark of the covenant.

In today's reading from the Old Testament, we enter a story where David has established his kingship over all of Israel after years of political maneuvering and bloodshed. A neighboring King recognizes David's reign and sends valuable cedar trees as a gift to David for him to build a house. David now has a luxurious accommodation.

But David wonders: I live in a house of cedar, but the ark of the covenant resides in a tent. And so he intends to build an equally luxurious house for the ark of the covenant. God shall dwell in a house of cedar!

But God had other plans. He tells David, no! Have I ever wanted a house of cedar, David? Instead, my plans are to establish a house for you, a dynasty for you. "I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel." I promise to bless you David even as I refuse your request to build a house for me.

All David is able to say in response is: "Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?... And what more can David say to you? For you know your servant, O Lord GOD!... do as you have promised." This is an acceptance of God's plans. An opening oneself to God's ways.

How similar is this to Mary's response to the visit of angel Gabriel to her. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Mary's dilemma was different. She was not a royalty like king David. She was a commoner, a teenage girl. She was not planning on building a luxurious accommodation where God could dwell. Instead, she was engaged and was likely thinking about her upcoming wedding and married life.

And yet, the God who picked David, an ordinary shepherd, and made him king, was the same God who picked this teenage girl with a plan to do something special.

The angel Gabriel's message is astounding. Mary, you will give birth to the Son of God, Jesus, whose kingdom will never end. I'm not sure how much Mary could understand God's plan in that moment.

But the message was pretty much this: Mary, God would be making a dwelling among people as a human, and this human would take shape in your womb. Your womb will help form his bones and tissues and muscles. The food that you eat would provide nourishment to this God as human growing within you. Mary, you will be instrumental in the formation of the humanity of God and making it possible for God to dwell among people.

No wonder, she is called the 'favored one' by the angel.

This is how God planned to live among the people-- in the humanity of Jesus Christ. John's gospel writes, "the Word became flesh and lived among us."

Just like the people of ancient Israel depended on the ark of the covenant for the presence of God, people for centuries have depended on the presence of God in Jesus Christ, a presence made real and concrete and human through God's work of favor and blessing on Mary.

Once Mary makes peace with God's work in her life, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word," she is able to rejoice in God.

As we get ready to celebrate Christmas, we celebrate the dwelling of God among us. A dwelling among us in the finite, frail, human flesh. We celebrate the birth of Jesus who stands in human solidarity with us and goes through the human experience to bring us salvation and redemption.

Like Mary and David, may we always be open to God's work in our lives. May we not be so tied to our own plans and limitations that we close ourselves to the wonderful possibilities in God.

And may this Christmas be a season of knowing Jesus and his dwelling among us. God dwelling within us, within our church, within our cities, and in this world. Amen.