

*HOUSING PERMITS*  
II SAMUEL 7:1-9, 11B, 16-17  
28 JULY 2018  
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC

*Our second text comes from II Samuel Seven, verses 1-9, 11b, 16-17.  
Listen for the Word of the Lord.*

Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, <sup>2</sup>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.’ <sup>3</sup>Nathan said to the king, ‘Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.’

<sup>4</sup> But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: <sup>5</sup>Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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?’ <sup>8</sup>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; <sup>9</sup>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 [...] Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. [...] <sup>16</sup>Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever. <sup>17</sup>In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

*This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.*

---

Those of y’all who know me know that I’m a creature of habit—I eat the same thing for breakfast every morning, measure my coffee with a digital scale, get in my car at the same time, drive the same route up and down and back between my house in the West End, Harris Teeter, Westminster, and Topsy Taco. Every day.

Occasionally, though, my car needs gas, which means I make my way to the QT on Academy. Tuesday was one of those days. I was driving mindlessly along when I realized that I’d missed something. I looked in my rearview mirror and saw that a four-way stop had popped up at Markley and Rhett. I’d blown right through it, so focused on my routine and on the seven new condominium buildings shooting up from the ground as if seed watered after a summer storm.

If you’ve been downtown recently you may have noticed Greenville’s seemingly endless supply of new housing complexes. We are building and building and building,

establishing our legacy as the best little town in the South. And that's a good thing, right?

Popular wisdom tells us it is. FDR, who cemented his legacy with the sweeping Works Progress Administration, put it this way: "Real estate cannot be lost or stolen, nor can it be carried away. Purchased with common sense, paid for in full, and managed with reasonable care, it is about the safest investment in the world."

*The safest investment in the world.* Remember that.

Young King David is taking a victory lap. He's solidified control over Israel and Judah. He's established a new capital in Jerusalem. His troops are at the ready and the people are on his side. David is riding high, and from his palace of imported Lebanese cedar, David has an idea—*build a temple*. It's a safe investment and good politics to boot. He must've been pleased as he settled into the plan, pleased as he imagined what the temple might be and what it would do for his legacy: a national symbol of divine favor, a monument to strength and security. David would build the house in which the God of creation would dwell.

Without much thought Nathan grants David the go-ahead. But only a few hours later the word of God makes a visit to the prophet. It's a shock of a message. God will not have David as his general contractor. You can almost hear the bemusement, "Are *you* the one to build *me* a house...?"

The word God brings to Nathan for David re-sets the king's self-understanding and shatters any myth he may harbor of self-reliance. David is only David because of God; David is only *king* because of God. Israel is only Israel because of God.

Verses 4-17 are dominated by first person nouns and pronouns. Through Nathan, God calls David to remember: to remember the work of the exodus, the hard-won freedom from Egypt, to remember the fields where the future-king labored in obscurity, to remember the hand at his side. Over and over again, *I have done this*.

God set out ahead before the need was known, mobile in a tabernacle, free in a tent. God made a people. God made a way.

So here's our question: *Could God have done all of this confined to a temple?* Another question: *if this is our God, a divinity on the move, what does that mean for us?*

From atop the world, David longed for security. He hoped in building a temple that he could keep everything exactly as it was. So he set out to build a house, to give God what he, David, had.

But the God whom David served could not be kept by human buildings *or* human expectations. That God did not need a temple, he *wanted* a co-worker.

II Samuel 7 reminds us that the God whom we serve doesn't need our sanctuaries, lovely though they are. God doesn't need us to build grand edifices to our faithfulness. God doesn't need us to prove that we are great by what we build, what we drive, where we live, how put together we seem. God needs our hearts. God needs our feet.

II Samuel 7 teaches us that God is God in a tent, not a temple; on the road, not encased in gold. And that *that* should matter for the way we live our lives and the circuits we ride.

Following God should never be a perfunctory habit, a routine like any other, a thing we do from the comfort of our homes and our sanctuaries — a way to pull ourselves up and establish our superiority. Poor David had to learn that lesson the hard way.

You may imagine when hearing this text that it was written in a time of prosperity, when David was still sitting pretty on his throne in Jerusalem, secure in his palace of cedar, multiplying his profits, safe from his enemies.

After all, real estate is the safest best in the world. Can't be lost and can't be carried away.

But you'd have lost that bet. II Samuel was written in exile, when, in fact, all of Jerusalem *had been* carried away, forced from their cedar homes to tents alongside Babylonian streams.

[...] "In succession," wrote T. S. Eliot in *East Coker*:  
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,  
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place  
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.  
Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,  
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth".

Things were good when David sought to build his temple. And he couldn't imagine a time life would be anything but hallelujahs. But not even the great David could build a temple grand enough to stop the march of time. Four-hundred years after his reign, the Davidic kingdom was defeated. The humiliation, the loss, seemed absolute.

The exile was calamitous for Israel. All their hopes were pinned on their great city, their dynasty, their sense of significance, on their grand traditions, lovely buildings, formidable plans. And then old stone was turned new ash. As with so many of us, catastrophe was accompanied by a crisis in faith.

The Israelites feared that they had lost God — or worse yet, that God had abandoned them. Before the exile they heard the good news: God created them, brought them from Egypt, encamped with them in the wilderness. God had never been bound to Jerusalem. Certainly they knew that God remained among them, that God still called them on.

But their knowledge had not yet transformed their living, and they despaired. Faith in exile didn't look like faith in bounty. But in both places—their high houses and humble tents—they had been stuck. They had confused living faith with shallow ritual. We do too.

“Try to imagine,” wrote Søren Kierkegaard, the great Dutch existentialist, “that geese could talk [...]

Every Sunday they would meet together and a gander would preach. The sermon was essentially the same each time—it told of the glorious destiny of geese, of the noble end for which their maker had created them—and every time his name was mentioned all the geese curtsied and all the ganders bowed their heads. They were to use their wings to fly away to distant pastures to which they really belong [...] The same thing happened each Sunday. Thereupon the meeting broke up and they all waddled home, only to meet again next Sunday for divine worship and waddle off home again—but that was as far as they ever got [...]

Imagine if our God were as immobile as we often are, as fixed in old habits and old ways, as bound to routines and schedules?! What good would that do—for us or for the world? How can an immobile God bring redemption, transformation, the renewed Kingdom?

The story of David reminds us that God is not immobile. God is not stuck in our temples or ideologies or routines. That's us.

Up and down Augusta Rd., occasionally blowing through a stop sign. Back and forth to church and home. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

It's a fine life, a good routine, a safe bet. But I think we are being called to more.

We are disciples not only by what we do in worship (by our curtsies and our bows), but by our willingness to humble ourselves and follow and by our witness in the world: by the love we bear, by the justice we pursue, by the welcome that marks our faithfulness.

We are disciples when we work not for our own bottom line but in pursuit of the kingdom of God — the Kingdom that chases after the least among us, that seeks out the lost sheep and the unlikely shepherd-king, that crosses borders and boundaries in pursuit of the beloved.

Discipleship is an *act*, it is the courage to follow the living God, not a state of perfect belief. And because discipleship is a lived experience it is also a risk.

When young Susan, a protagonist in the *Narnia* series, learned that Aslan, C. S. Lewis's masterful Christ-character, was a lion, she was rightly concerned. "Is he — quite safe?" // "Safe? [...] Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good."

Why has God granted us legs if not to follow? Hearts if not for the world? Eyes if not to see the hem of the robe which beckons us on and cloaks us in its mercy?

The Israelites were looking for God in the wrong places. They saw God in their habits and in their grandeur. They recognized God only in glory. And they lost him in exile, when the sure thing failed and their houses were carried away.

But God was always up ahead. Encamped with them. Leading them on. In exile and in victory. In joy and in sadness.

What difference does it make that our God is on the move? All the difference in the world.

Discipleship is an exercise in using our God-given legs to get outside of our man-made temples. It is a pursuit of the good: the good in us, and the good in those God loves, the pursuit of truth beyond our ideologies, and welcome outside of our temples. It is not always safe. But it is good.

"Foxes have holes," Jesus told his disciples, "and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Jesus needed neither temple nor glory. His home was among those he loved. And he was always calling them on.

Jesus crossed borders and boundaries, ate with rich religious folks, scummy tax collectors, and a whole host of folks that polite society would he rather have avoided. And he asked his disciples to follow.

Even death could not stop the Son of David; the resurrection is a grand proclamation that our God is on the loose. We should be too.

I'm glad you've made Westminster a part of your routine. I'm glad it's a part of mine. But this can't be the sum of our faith, an hour or two each week, a nice prayer, a sense of gratitude. This cannot be our end, it must be our beginning.

David worried at his legacy, he longed for a safe bet. But God was calling him to better things. That very same God calls us too.

How will that call change your living?

We can build and build and strive, as if we are the authors of our own lives, as if we can contract our own greatness. Or we can follow, and find at last the greatness of a

God on the loose, God among the people, God across town, God in our houses and beyond them, always calling us on.

The question rings from the God who keeps faithfulness and who pulls us forward, who meets us wherever we are and paves the road for us ahead. “Tell me what it is you plan to do,” wrote Mary Oliver, “with your one wild and precious life.”

—*Leigh Stuckey*