

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, July 18, 2021
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

“Wherever You Are”

Hebrew Scripture: II Samuel 7:14a



Having recently purchased a home and with intentions to build one in the future, I am very interested in and intrigued by this story about King David and the prophet Nathan. In this story, often entitled ‘The Oracle of Nathan’, it seems to me that King David felt a bit guilty that he had just built himself a luxurious house of cedar and poor ol’ God was stuck in a tent out back. I know the feeling! My parents are visiting my family.



They drove all the way from Florida to New England and upon their arrival on Wednesday, I found them out back in an RV trailer while I was to luxuriate in my master bedroom. And if they aren't in the trailer, they are holed-up in my basement (which doubles as the guest room)! So, I know how King David must have felt: a bit guilty.



So, King David proposed building God a house, a temple. Initially, Nathan agreed. Yet, that same evening, God spoke to Nathan and advised against King David building God a house. I suppose if I offered my parents my master bedroom, they also would have gracefully refused (unless, of course, I pitched an actual tent in the backyard rather than the RV trailer).



If we were to continue reading to verse 29 of chapter 7, we would count the word 'house' fifteen times. And as I read the scripture, the word 'house' has three different meanings. The first use refers to David's palace (vv. 1-2). The second God's temple (vv. 5, 6, 7, and 13). And the third usage of house refers to the Davidic Dynasty (vv. 11, 16, 18, 19, 25, 26, 27, and 29 twice).¹ Perhaps our first lesson this morning is that that the Bible should often not be interpreted literally because the Bible was often not *intended* to be read literally. In II Samuel, a house is metaphor for a palace, a temple, and a dynasty. God founded the dynasty upon the promises made in today's scripture whereby God established a covenant with David that would never be broken.² Christians understand that the dynasty culminated with the birth of King David's descendant, Jesus the Christ.

Given the purchase of a home and my interest in building one, I wondered all week why God would refuse such an infrastructural gift from King David. After all, who wants to be stuck out in a tent in the backyard?! I know my Mom wouldn't! There are three reasons perhaps. Two are political and the other is spiritual. I will just mention the first two and dwell on the last.

¹ Ralph Klein, Working Preacher, Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, "Commentary on 2 Samuel 7:1-14a", July 19, 2015. Found at: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-2/commentary-on-2-samuel-71-14-3>, accessed July 20, 2021.

² Samuel Giere, Working Preacher, Fourth Sunday of Advent, "Commentary on 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16", December 21, 2008. Found at: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-2-samuel-71-11-16-2>, accessed July 20, 2021.



One reason why God refused King David's offer to build a temple was given by King Solomon, King David's son, and the one who actually built the first temple. King Solomon indicated that because King David grew, unified, and thus founded the nation, he was simply too busy with war to devote any time to construction (I Kings 5:3-5).³ Related to this reason, the writer of Chronicles indicated that David simply had too much blood on his hands to be able to erect a sacred and pure edifice (I Chronicles 22:8 and 28:3).

A second reason why God refused King David's offer to build a temple is perhaps because God wished to warn the Chosen People not to engage in an unhealthy mixture of church and state.⁴ You see, if a king were to build a temple then there is a risk that all those associated with the temple, the religious priests and bureaucrats, might be beholden to the king and thus applaud all every thought and action. We know that notoriously poor leaders surround themselves

³ David Howard, Jr. "David", *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2 (D-G), ed. David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 44.

⁴ Ralph Klein, Working Preacher, Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, "Commentary on 2 Samuel 7:1-14a", July 19, 2015. Found at: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-2/commentary-on-2-samuel-71-14-3>, accessed July 20, 2021.

with people who agree with them all the time. We know David's sin of having Uriah killed and eloping with his wife Bathsheba led to a huge confrontation with Nathan (who held his own against the powerful king). Nathan served as a spiritual check on David, the political authority. This might not have been the case if Nathan were dependent on David's temple. We know of stories in the scriptures whereby prophets and priests had to go 'toe to toe' with kings, holding them to account. Remember the king's wife Jezebel going after Elijah (I Kings 19)? God's fear of an unhealthy mixture of church and state came to fruition after Solomon built the temple. We saw the dangers of an unhealthy mix of church and state when the king's priest Amaziah, who was too closely aligned with the king, rebuked the prophet Amos (Amos 7:10-17).



As a former lecturer on political science and history, I see a pattern whereby faith, and even Christianity, the Church, is weakened and even corrupted by too close an association with the state. We are Protestants because in part due to the corruption caused when the church and state had too unhealthy an alliance

during the Middle Ages. I for one never wish for the United States to become a 'Christian nation'. This is not because I do not love and cherish Christianity and not because I do not wish for others to follow Jesus – for I do. I do not wish for the United States to be a 'Christian nation' because history demonstrates to me that whenever my faith, the Church, has an unhealthy alliance with the state, faith is weakened because it utilizes the state and its power as a crutch. Furthermore, both the church and the state corrupt one another. I do not need nor do I want "In God We Trust" on my currency; nor do I want the Ten Commandments in my courts; nor do I wish my President to protolyze by holding-up a Bible in a televised photo-op. I want the church to strengthen the church, not the government.

The third and perhaps most important reason for God not wishing David to build a temple is that God did not wish to be confined by human beings to "a particular location or structure".⁵



In Genesis, God's spirit "hovered over the waters" (Genesis 1:2). God was in the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-17). God was in the still small voice (silence) (I Kings

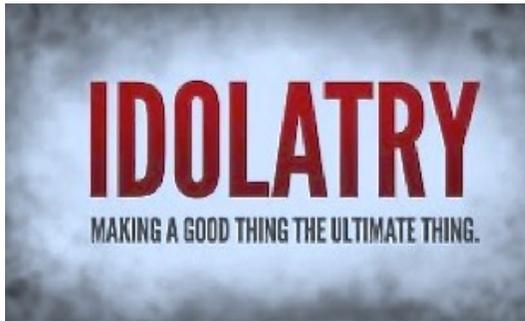
⁵ John Wevers, "The Second Book of Samuel", *The Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles Laymon (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1971, 174.

19:12). God's presence was found at the summit of a mountain (Exodus 19). While it is true that since the time of Moses the Hebrews understood that God inhabited the ark of the covenant, the tent, and the tabernacle - God was nonetheless mobile! God had locomotion! God was able, as God did during the Exodus, to go out ahead of the people leading them from Egypt (Number 10:33). God moved! God desired to be present with, alongside, and ahead of the people. Perhaps the building of a temple was humans' idea and humans' desire was simply projected on to God so in time it became, in humans' eyes, the will of God. There is a precedent for this! God never wished for his people to have a king. Yet, the Chosen Ones wanted to be like all other nations. So, they bayed for a kingdom despite God's warnings against such a polity. Perhaps the temple was built despite God, not because of God.



In the book of Isaiah, the idea of building a temple is retroactively criticized because God perhaps never wished a temple to be built. God stated and

questioned, “Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me?” (Isaiah 66:1). To build a temple was an attempt to control God or to limit God’s freedom and God resisted that.

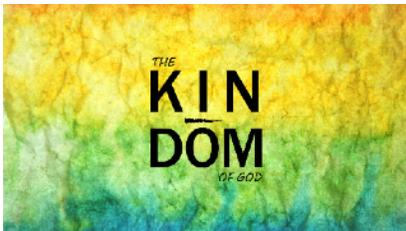


A temple might have been understood by God to be an idol. Often congregations treat their buildings and their sanctuaries as if they are idols – almost worshipping them. Congregations that see their sanctuary as the focus of their ministry, as the Holy of Holies, as sacrosanct, miss the meaning of faith and mission. Of course, I am not saying congregations shouldn’t take care of their buildings, invest in them, and create an atmosphere of welcome combined with the sacred. We should! What I am saying is that the church building and the sanctuary ought not be our end but rather only a means to an end. I am saying that our ministry is not *to* our sanctuary. Rather, our ministry is *to* people and world outside the sanctuary.



This is why I love our new “The Green at Centre” ministry. For it seeks to bring people to our sanctuary, yet it does so by welcoming people *outside* of it – in the community. The Green at Centre, whereby we host community activities on our front lawn, states that our faith is about God and relationships. Our faith is about God and people. Our faith is about God and spirit. Our faith is about God and creativity. Our faith is about God and the beautiful Creation. Centre Church does not have an ‘edifice complex’.⁶

Friends, perhaps God did not wish for the temple to be built because God told David through Nathan that something grander will be constructed (through Jesus).



⁶ Ralph Klein, Working Preacher, Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, “Commentary on 2 Samuel 7:1-14a”, July 19, 2015. Found at: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-2/commentary-on-2-samuel-71-14-3>, accessed July 20, 2021.

That something is the kin-dom of God. The kin-dom of God is where God resides. That is where I want to be. That is what I strive for. If you strive for the kin-dom of God, that is where you will find God. God is not trapped in an ark, not in a tent, not in a tabernacle, not in temple, and not in church sanctuary. No. If you strive for the kin-dom of God, God will be wherever you are.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, "Amen!"