

2 Samuel 7:1-11

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

But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? 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. 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?' 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; 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. 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, 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.

“No Place Like Home for the Holidays”

Rev. Charles Schuster

December 20, 2009

Dave Barry said it this way: "Once again we find ourselves enmeshed in the holiday season, this very special time of year when we join with our loved ones in sharing the centuries-old traditions, such as trying to find a parking space at the mall." Johnny Carson was a cynic, but not too far from most of us when he said, "Mail your packages early so the Post Office can lose them in time for Christmas." You were probably at the Post Office last week, as we were, and you may have noticed the piles of packages. It's no wonder that they lose some of them. The reading this morning captures on a cosmic level something that is intensely temporal. God saying to David, through the prophet Nathan, because it seemed like Nathan was the only one David would listen to, God saying to the prophet Nathan to say to David, "Are you the one to build me a house?" "God yearns for a house. David, build God a house" It was all about the Temple, of course.

Abraham Heschel has a theology based upon texts like that, the idea that God is not at home in the world. God is in search of us. We are God's stake in the universe, Heschel believed. The Creator is alien in the Creation. That our job on earth is to build a world in which God is at home. Build a house for God. In the collective chaos of Christmas there is a need for calm. It is in our hearts. But it is also with God. That's what we learn with the text. And we will come here on Christmas Eve. Lots of us will come here. Churches all over the world, Christian churches, will be filled on Christmas Eve because there is a yearning. Home for the holidays, church at Christmas. Church is home. Why do we

come, first of all? We come because of the warmth of the heart that brings us here. John Wayne was wrong, I think, when he said, "I don't much like God when he gets under a roof." Even John Wayne, I believe, would have liked God under a roof at Christmas. We long for a place. We come home for the holiday. Robert Frost said, "I'm not confused, I'm just well-mixed." We the well-mixed come home for Christmas.

Harper Lee, she lived next door to Truman Capote, they were good friends, and when she wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she put her neighbor Truman in the book. He's one of the characters. Jim is his name. She had a father who was a lawyer. Atticus in the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a lawyer. Scout was his daughter. She was Scout, a tomboy. Atticus was her father. Her real father, like Atticus, defended a black man in a murder trial in a racist society. In other words, her book is autobiographical, though she denies it. What she says in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "No amount of sighing could induce Atticus my father to let us spend Christmas Day at home." She is tapping into something we all long for, she longs for, God longs for as well, the warmth of Christmas. Home for the holiday, and the house of God is home for us. It's why we come on Christmas to church.

His name is Robert Smith. When he was a little boy, his mother took care of a ninety-year-old woman who lived across the street. She would check on her, she would buy her groceries, and Robert's job was to deliver the groceries to Mrs. Hildebrandt. Mrs. Hildebrandt loved to talk, and Robert liked to listen to her. She talked about growing up on a farm in the old days. She talked about going to church in the little church that was in the woods. She described the old church on Christmas, and how that was home for her. Mrs. Hildebrandt would give Robert a couple of dollars and he would go to Buyer's Pharmacy and buy a candy bar or a comic book. The day before Christmas he delivered Mrs. Hildebrandt's groceries and it was snowing, and Robert really wanted to go sledding with his friends, but that was one day that Mrs. Hildebrandt wanted to talk, and she talked about Christmas and the little church in the woods, and Robert decided the snow could wait, and he would listen. He could almost picture the church as she described it. And that day she gave him five dollars. He objected, but she insisted, and so he left her house, and he raced over to Buyer's Pharmacy and that day he thought about ice cream and hot chocolate, but when he got to the pharmacy he saw a Christmas card. It had a picture on the front of it. It was a picture of a little church in the woods. He picked up the card and took it to the counter and he put down his money and Mr. Buyer smiled at him and said, "For your girlfriend, Robert?" and he paused and then he said, "Yeah, it's for my girlfriend." He ran back to Mrs. Hildebrandt's house with the card and the picture, the church on the front of it, resembling the very one she talked about. He rang the doorbell. She came to the door. He gave her the envelope. "Merry Christmas," he said. She opened the envelope and she looked at what she saw, the picture of the church she knew. In a voice that was barely a whisper, and there were tears in her eyes, she said to him, "Merry Christmas, Robert, Merry Christmas." That Christmas in the evening, the ambulance arrived. They found Mrs. Hildebrandt in bed. She had died in her sleep. On the table by the bed, the night light was still turned on. There was only one thing. It was her whole Christmas. Then only thing she opened, it was the card and the picture of the little church, and the 12-year-old boy invited the ninety-year-old woman back home on Christmas Day.

We have a need to be home for Christmas, and the church is part of what that means. It is our home. It is God's house. The Jewish theologian Heschel would say God is in search of us. A Christian theologian would add to that, God looks out at us from eternity with a human face. The baby Jesus. It's the warmth that brings us home. God is here, incarnate. It is God's house. It is why we come.

Secondly, once we get here, we've got a job to do. Our job is to shine. The United Methodist Church in Arvada decided to videotape their Christmas children's pageant this year and put it on the web page. The pastor of the church called me up and said I might want to watch that. It was the church where I was appointed before I came here, you see. I looked at it yesterday. It was fun to watch. Two shepherds, twins. When I was there six and a half years ago they were infants. They were in the pageant that year. Twin girls, both of them playing Baby Jesus. We took one of them out after we were singing "Joy to the World" and put the other one in. You just can't have one child telling her sister, "I got to play Baby Jesus and you didn't." Now they're in first grade, and if you look at the web page, one of them yawned when the angel of the Lord came in and said, "Fear not." And the most amazing part of the pageant was when one of the magi, the wise men, the kings came in, and one of the kings, and I recognized the boy, one of the kings who played the role of Melchior presented the Baby Jesus with his gift, frankincense I think, and then this kid turned and waved to the congregation, and then he bowed, like a king. It was unrehearsed and it was royal, and the people applauded. It was a chance for the children to shine.

Ellen Watts remembers a Christmas visit with her daughter's family. They had this tradition in that family, that they would put in the stockings that hung on the mantel above the fireplace, they would put money in the stockings. Ellen and her husband put a fifty-dollar bill in their daughter's stocking, and a fifty-dollar bill in their son-in-law's stocking, and then in their granddaughter's stocking a five-dollar bill. When Sarah, the six year old discovered the discrepancy, she announced, "Oh dear. One of my zeroes fell off." Christmas is a time for children to shine and the zeroes stay on. Children in the pageant take a bow. All of us at Christmas realize when we gather to celebrate the birth of the Christ child, we're doing something that actually calls attention to us. It's not about Jesus alone, it's not about God alone, it's about God present in Jesus so God can be present to us. And in celebration of that, we shine. We step up with our light.

Sue Monk Kidd has written several books, *The Secret Life of Bees*, they made a movie out of it, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, well, now she's written a book with her daughter Ann, entitled *Traveling with Pomegranates*. Mother and daughter, writing about their travels together. Ann, the daughter, contemplates what it means to become an older woman, she's 35. Discovering new spiritual focus, regenerating a whole center of her life. Sue, the mother, thinks about working with her daughter on the book, the long sessions, the reminiscing, the probing, the tears, the discovery, the challenges, the commiserating, the encouraging. Sue and Ann. Sue remembers the day years ago when Ann was in the children's pageant at the church, first grade. Sue made the costume for her daughter. Ann was the star that led the Magi to the manger. Sue asked Ann, "What part do you have in

the play?" and little Ann, age six then, said, "I have the best part of all, Mommy, I get to stand there and shine." That's our job, when we come to God's house on Christmas. We hold up our candles and we shine. One candle will not defeat the night, but one candle not shining will allow the dark to be a little darker than it would have been.

Bill Coffin said it, and I think he's right, he said, "One version of Christianity that's out of step with Christmas is the joyless Christmas." He said, "If we're Christians, we ought to act and look redeemed." And then he said, "Otherwise, we have just enough religion to make ourselves miserable." When we come to God's house, when we come home for Christmas, our job is to shine. We may be sad, but we light a candle. We may have tears in our eyes, but that doesn't stop us from defying the night. We may think the sun will never shine again, but we take our place to bring a sunrise into a dark space, even if it seems "what's the use?" we light our candle from the Christ candle and the light of the world lights our world, to light the candle, to lift it, to curse the darkness, to be the joy we sing, to lift our heads, to join our hearts, to see the wonder. Carol Stocker said, "My garden is a balancing act between weeding and wonder." To shine is to celebrate the wonder, but to know the weeds. That's why we come.

Finally, how do we leave? We are drawn in by the warmth of Christmas. We are compelled to shine. That's our job. But we leave remembering the glow of those who have gone before us. When you came into the sanctuary today, you were not doubt struck by the beauty of the place. Our church staff has worked really hard to make this place beautiful. It's God's house. The youth of the church have decorated our sanctuary, they have decorated our building, they have brought us Advent and Christmas. They have done it. We have put some lights in, some colored lights that you probably.... We have mad the cross more visible. But the thing that you probably noticed today when you came was the poinsettia plants, and the list in the bulletin of the loved ones being honored by the plants. It's the glow of those who have gone to glory.

It was the first Christmas after we had remodeled the sanctuary, when there was concern about fire safety and the candle-lighting service, and allegedly, we were worried about the danger of fire and all the people. I can't prove this, but I think what drove the issue was candle wax on the new carpet. We looked at alternatives. My suggestion was that we all pull out our cell phones and turn them on while we were singing "Silent Night" on Christmas Eve, but that fell on deaf ears. We talked about buying flashlights for everybody, but that cost too much, and we decided to go back to the candles and the fire, when in the middle of the discussion, one of the women, and we were sitting right here in the sanctuary discussing this, she said, "The last Christmas Eve I had with my mother and sisters, we sat in the pew and passed the flame from her candle to ours. I will never forget it. My sisters will never forget it. I don't think we want to lose that tradition." The glow of the people who have gone to glory in God's house before us. That's why we come to worship. That's what sends us out. That's why we gather to celebrate their lives, and on Christmas, their glow gives us the inspiration to go in peace and to leave renewed.

This doesn't altogether fit, but I'll say it. It's what Napoleon Bonaparte said about champagne. Now, you don't often hear a quote from Napoleon Bonaparte, and you don't

often hear something quoted about champagne, so go with me on this one. He said, about champagne, "In victory you deserve it. In defeat you need it." In celebration, those who have gone before us bring us joy. In sadness, in grief, their lives inspire us to overcome our loss. The glow of those who live in the glory of God carries us forward. This past week Steve Swecker, a friend of mine, wrote an article about someone I knew. It's in the magazine *Progressive Christian*. Tom was his name, Tom Bennett. I played baseball with Tom. I was a pitcher, he was in right field. A small kid, uniform too big for him. Hat came down over his ears. His baseball glove always looked like it was going to fall off his hand. When he came up to the plate to bat, opposing pitchers couldn't find the strike zone, so they'd walk him, and then he'd drive them crazy because he was fast. He'd steal every base including home. We grew up together. He always smiled. Just seeing Tommy made you laugh. We even, the two of us, went to Duke Divinity School together, to see it, to see if that's what we wanted to do. He thought about ministry when I did. I did it, he didn't. They named a clinic after him in Texas. The Bennett Clinic, primary care clinic, it's where the major worked at Camp Hood. The man who did the murders worked in the Bennett Center, named after Tom. The University of West Virginia named its alumnae house after him. The state of West Virginia names a bridge after him. Tommy Bennett was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Richard Nixon in the Vietnam war. He was awarded the Medal of Honor because of his conspicuous courage under fire. Tom Bennett rescued wounded comrades and was mortally wounded himself. Tom Bennett died saving lives as a medic in the Army. He hated war. He was a conscientious objector. There are only two conscientious objectors ever to receive the Medal of Honor. Tommy was one of them. And this Christmas, I'm going to think of a friend who could have been standing right here where I am, giving you the sermon, preaching a sermon on peace, and the Prince of Peace, grew up a Methodist, in church together. The glow of the glory of the life he lived inspired those who knew him to work for peace, to make God at home, to build God a house. Home for the holidays, home for Christmas.

Why do we come? We are drawn in by the warmth. When we get here, we are compelled to shine, and leaving, we have seen the glory of those who have gone before us. John Brokoff was a professor at Candler School of Theology, professor of preaching, and he had served several churches in several states. He tells about visiting a family. A three-year-old boy climbed up on his lap and whispered, "I know a secret. You must not tell my Mama. She's going to the hospital to have a baby in the next several months, but don't tell her. Me and Daddy want her to be surprised." Like a mother waiting to have a baby, she doesn't need to be informed, but reminded. This morning that's what I've tried to do. Most of us will be in church on Christmas Eve somewhere. I've tried to remind us why we come. It's the warmth of home, and the church is our spiritual home. It's a chance to shine, and we will light a candle, and we will again defeat the darkness. It's the glow of those who have gone to glory. They give us the inspiration to carry on. They do. And God said to David, "Will you build me a home?" And it isn't in the text, but then God said, "Will you join me at Christmas? I'll be there. I'll save you a seat."