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“On the Move”

II Samuel 7:1-14a

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Introduction:

When God delivered the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, it was to bring them to a land of promise and security, where God would dwell in their midst. In Exodus, the Lord gives Moses the command to collect an offering of numerous items that they might construct a moveable sanctuary, a mobile “house,” if you will, for God.

No more should God be considered some distant deity, for God is physically making God’s home among mortals—where the people go, God will go with them. What God is describing in Exodus is the sanctuary tent, the Tabernacle. An actual, massive, physical tent and courtyard they could move with them from place to place. The Tabernacle was the place of dwelling for God’s spirit. It was the traveling house of God.

What a gift this was to these wilderness people—these people who left the only home they’d ever known (as dangerous as it was for them) to wander toward a place they could only imagine. In their years of wandering, they had no place to call home, they had no real idea what kind of place awaited them. The Tabernacle represented something special and holy. It was a physical reminder of God’s presence, and a promise that God was in their midst, no matter where they were.



Generations later, in 2 Samuel, God’s people were established in the Promised Land, and King David felt it time to give the Lord a better home and build a Temple. It sounded like a good plan. The only problem was that the Lord had something different in mind.

2 Samuel 7:1-14a. Now when the king [David] was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ²the 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.’ ³Nathan said to the king, ‘Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.’

⁴But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: ⁵Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? ⁶I 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. ⁷Wherever 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?’ ⁸Now 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; ⁹and 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. ¹⁰And 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, ¹¹from 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. ¹²When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

When I was a girl, I can remember walking into the large sanctuary at First Baptist Church in Greer, SC. And I can remember someone telling me—maybe it was my mother, maybe it was a Sunday school teacher—that this big, beautiful space was God’s house. I remember wondering that if this is God’s house, then that explains why I have to mind my manners at church, and wear special Sunday clothes. But if this space was God’s house, what does the church down the street think that they’re doing? And if this is God’s house, what’s God doing all week when we’re not here? Even though we moved to a different church when I was school aged, whenever someone talks about the “house of God,” I still picture that bright white sanctuary with its wrap-around balcony. It’s amazing how a place can stick in your mind or memory like that. “Place,” having a place, wanting a place, can be so formative.



Years ago, Presbyterian pastor and youth ministry consultant Mark Devries preached here at Second Pres. and shared an illustration that has always stuck with me. The story centered around the great dining hall of New College at Oxford University. Founded in 1379, New College is not so . . . new. Their dining hall is huge. Picture the dining hall in Harry Potter. New College's dining hall had ancient oak beams spanning across the ceiling, as large as two feet square and forty-five feet long each.

Some years ago, it was discovered that the beams were infested with beetles. This unfortunate news was reported to the College Council. Beams this large were now very hard, if not impossible to come by. They wondered where they would be able to find beams like this, let alone how they would pay for them.

Someone suggested that perhaps they ought to look through the school archives. Maybe they would find details about the original building and where those trees had come from. Low and behold, they found notes pointing them toward endowed lands donated to the school generations ago. Someone had deeded to New College a plot of land with very specific instructions. Duke so and so deeded this land to New College at Oxford University for the express purpose of planting trees. This information was 500 years old, they assumed this land had probably changed hands dozens of times. But the school went to the caretaker, a forester who told the university, "I've been waiting for you."

Sure enough, there were rows of centuries' old oak trees because someone had the foresight to say we could make a difference for people we will never see.ⁱ

Devries' point in his sermon here all those years ago was that often, our role as the church is not to take care of ourselves, but to consider the future. Our role is to think about the generations after us. To plant seeds, prepare the way for the Kingdom that we ourselves may never see come to full fruition.

King David had come from humble origins as a shepherd, risen up through the military ranks, and avoided many a tight spot to be anointed and crowned king of Israel and Judah. Finally, he was fulfilling God's plan for him and his nation. For generations, God's people had prayed for a leader like this. They'd prayed for a king and a royal dynasty that would bring stability and prosperity.

David was getting things done. He was excited to rule. He had plans and dreams, and he knew what he wanted to do next. He wanted to get rid of that mobile Tabernacle, that mobile tent



for God and build a temple fit for a holy king. He wanted something that rivaled the temples of his enemies' gods. He wanted to show off his power and wealth.

At first, the prophet Nathan was on board. It sounds like a good idea. The new king is ready to build and bask in the glory of a beautiful temple for God.

But, as 2 Samuel reveals, God had other plans. David wasn't going to be the one to build a temple, but to plant the seed. It was not he who would reap the benefit and glory of a temple for God, but the next generation.

God spoke to the prophet Nathan and reminded him that God's dwelling place had always been mobile. The people could move the Tabernacle and be continually reassured of God's presence with them.

And God's primary concern isn't about what this new leader David will do to bring glory to David's own name, but that David's kingship will point to God and God's concern for God's people. God's ultimate concern, as we see time and again in Scripture, is about the people.

God goes on to explain that the goal of all this goodness toward David will be that God will have made a place for God's people. A place where they can be planted, put down roots, and have rest from warfare and insecurity. Dr. Tim McNinch points out that the key word here in our passage from 2 Samuel is "place," the Hebrew word *maqom*.ⁱⁱ The word *maqom* often indicates more than just the simple word "place." In the Bible, the word is used to indicate a special place, often a holy place. When Moses encountered God at the burning bush, that place (*maqom*) was called holy ground. When Jacob had the dream of angels going to and from the very spot where he slept, he woke up and said, "Surely the holy one is here in this *maqom*."

The meaning of any term, of course, is always dependent on its context. And *maqom* doesn't always mean a holy temple or a holy site. But here in this context, where the discussion is all about building a house or temple for God in Jerusalem, David's capital city, it makes perfect sense that God starts talking about setting up a holy site, a *maqom*—but not for David, and not for God, but for God's people, a place where they can dwell secure.

Whatever success David has had is not David's own accomplishment, it is God's doing. David may be the king, but he is also a means toward God's ultimate goal for care of the people. Even in the Israelite monarchy, these scribes understood that the ultimate purpose of political leadership was the benefit of the people, not the other way around.



In our own national and local political season, it's worth remembering that political leadership is meant to serve the people and not aggrandize the politician.

For his own days, Nathan explains that David must accept the Tabernacle, that traveling tent, as a reminder of his own limited power. And Nathan also challenges us as people of faith to think of ourselves as pilgrims underway.

Here, in our sanctuary literally made of stone, with our own arching beams, it is easy for us to imagine that Second Presbyterian has always been here, will always be here. But what might this message mean for people like us? How might we adopt Nathan's reminder to David as the ruler of the small Judean state whom God had raised from being a little shepherd boy to become a leader?

Lutheran Old Testament scholar Klaus-Peter Adam argues that like David, the church is neither static nor stagnant, but it consistently finds itself underway. Martin Luther conceives of our faith life as a dynamic trajectory of pilgrims on the move: "This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness. . . . We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it; the process is not yet finished, but it is going on; this is not the end, but it is the road."ⁱⁱⁱ

We know that road—or at least we sure ought to. Because God doesn't live in any one place. The church is not God's house. It is the place where God's people gather to worship and do God's work together. God is too big for one building. God is always on the move among all the people of the world. And we are to keep up, we must recognize we are pilgrims on a journey. We follow faithfully as we can, always in motion and continually renewing and being renewed.

As we fulfill our days, how might we as a congregation build up a "house of living stones"? How might we plant seeds in ways that future generations might harvest the fruit?

The church is not static nor stagnant, but we find ourselves always underway. Our work is never complete. The ministries that take place within these walls, across the street at Alexa House, and even blocks and miles from here, remind us that God is on the move, the church is always moving.

To think we have God figured out, to think we know all we need to know about God, to think God believes and wants exactly what we believe and want is to try to build a box around God. But God is here to say to Nathan, God is here to say to us not "Thanks for the shiny box," but instead, "Try to keep up."

May the seeds we plant, may the foundations we lay, bear fruit for the world beyond these walls, for the generations we may never know. We are called "People of the Way," pilgrims on a



journey. We can trust in God’s love and concern for the people, and God’s presence is always the plan.

ⁱ Atlas Obscura, “Oak Beams, New College Oxford,” March 23, 2010. <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/oak-beams-new-college-oxford>

ⁱⁱ Tim McNinch, “Summer Shorts: 2 Samuel 7,” First Reading Podcast, July 8, 2024. <https://firstreadingpodcast.com/podcast/2-samuel-7114a/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Klaus-Peter Adam, “Commentary on 2 Samuel 7:1-14a,” Working Preacher, July 21, 2024. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-2/commentary-on-2-samuel-71-14a-2>

