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2 Samuel 7; Luke 2
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BACK TO THE FUTURE

The theme for this fourth Sunday of Advent is the Annunciation. Advent, which means “coming” or “arrival,” is a time of anticipation and great expectancy: preparation for God’s invasion of time and space in the person of his son Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah. One week away from the Christmas feast, we rejoice today at the annunciation of the Christ.

As a child, nothing created more expectation and anticipation than Christmas. I was nine years old the year I decided to shoot the moon. I’ve loved cars since I was a preschooler, the year my dad brought home a brand new, first edition Mustang on a test drive. Bright red. Chrome wheels. Unbelievable.

A few years later, the Christmas of 1970, the wonderful Mattel toy “Hot Wheels” cars and tracks were very popular. I asked for the deluxe model. This set had it all. Miles of track, battery-operated thrusters, bridges, loops, banked curves and best of all, four cars. Shiny, sparkling, wheel-spinning, fast cars.

Now at this time, my mom was working outside of the home, and nearly every day I had a short time on my own between school and her arrival home. These were prime snooping hours. For days I searched every nook of the house. I even climbed up to the garage rafters. No Hot Wheels.

But then one day, a look up on the shelf in the guest room closet netted gold: the holy grail of Hot Wheels. Carefully hidden under a blanket, I knew what it was—it practically glowed from under its fuzzy cloak. The excitement nearly killed me but somehow I survived until Christmas morning with near-daily visits to the forbidden closet.

Anticipation and longing were far more intense in ancient Israel and a matter of life and death as far as the people were concerned. In exile and under the oppression of foreign kings for six centuries, the nation longed for the promised Messiah. Their only hope against enormous odds and oppression was for this one to come and deliver them. Would he ever come? Would God’s presence ever return amongst the people? Would Israel ever be restored to glory?

This morning, I want to ask the questions, What is it that fueled Israel’s hope of expectation? Was it fulfilled, and if so, how did YHWH carry it out?

Let’s start today by turning to the second book of Samuel. Here much of Israel’s foundation of hope is constructed. The scene opens with David and the prophet Nathan, who appears for the first time in scripture. David is finally settled in as king. The Ark of the Covenant has at long last been brought to Jerusalem. David has danced before the Lord and YHWH has blessed him and Israel with a season of contentment and rest. One day, David makes an observation.

I. David’s Concern and Plan

After the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, he said to Nathan the prophet, “Here I am, living in a palace of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent.”

Nathan replied to the king, “Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you.” (2 Sam 7:1-3 NIV)

I live in a palace of cedar, says David, and the Ark of God dwells in a tent. David recognizes an untenable contrast—this can’t be right. The stately cedar tree in ancient days was prized for its durability. It was used to build David’s house and later Solomon’s temple, Solomon’s chariots and even the post-exilic temple. With cedar, there was a sense of permanence and longevity. The tent on the other hand was a dwelling of nomads. David is settled, but he believes that YHWH is not. In observing this disturbing disparity, the story clearly indicates that David has in mind to build a dwelling for the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of God’s presence amongst the people, although he never actually says so.

Nathan understands where David is going with this and encourages him: go ahead, “YHWH is with you.” Nathan has observed all that which YHWH has done for David and doesn’t hesitate to encourage him. But what about God? What does he think of David’s plans? Well, he has other ideas.

II. YHWH’s Oracle of the Future Kingdom

A. The Refusal of a House

That night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying:

“Go and tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. Whenever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’” (2 Sam 7:4-7)

With a strong rhetorical exclamation, YHWH corrects both David and Nathan’s thinking on the matter. In a dream, he communicates a two-part oracle to Nathan to be delivered to David. This first portion flatly refuses David’s desire. Almost incredulously, God states that he has never demanded a house of cedar, and by implication says, “Why would I start now?” My command is not to build things, says God, but to shepherd my people. That’s what I want, David, that’s what I demand, that is my longing. How many saints have been neglected throughout the ages by church leadership in favor of the building of great buildings, pursuing great projects, while neglecting the true building blocks of God’s kingdom—his people? As a pastor, I fight almost daily the temptation to elevate my project and task list over the needs of people. My wife will be the first to tell you I get my game-face on and start moving like a steamroller. Yes, things need to get done, but if they all happen at the expense of people, priorities are wrong. To lead in God’s kingdom is to be a shepherd. The model of an iron-fisted, dominating and fully-autonomous king who leaves behind a legacy of brick and mortar is not God’s model, but the world’s corrupted vision.

Jan Fokkelman gives us an insight into the structure of this passage.¹

- a. are you the one to build?
 - b. I have not dwelt, from the Exodus to now
 - c. I have been moving
 - c' wherever I have moved
 - b' did I ever speak to the shepherds of Israel
- a' why have you not built me a house?

At the center is the truth that God is on the move. He will move as he will move. We try to put God in our own box, to control him, to determine where, how, and why he should act, and we grow angry when he does not act as we believe he should. He is a wild and unpredictable God. He delights in giving us seasons when we are settled and at peace, but he will not be constrained by our mood or season in life. He is on the move, doing great work. But we don’t do well with unpredictability. We like things consistent. We like things comfortable.

I love music. I enjoy nothing more than my happy place at home, in front of my stereo, by the fire with a good book in hand. Just a couple of weeks ago, my amplifier went hay-wire and took the speakers with it. Total meltdown. The expense and loss of a treasured possession were bad enough, but what really hurt was the temporary loss of that comfortable, safe and peaceful place where so often my soul has been refreshed through great music and a great book. It was disconcerting and disorienting.

Far, far worse is the indescribably difficult time through which residents of the Gulf Coast are walking. The destruction is everywhere and will continue to be for years. Even homes that look fine on the outside must be stripped down to the framework due to the pervasive flooding. Every physical comfort, every safe place was swept away by the winds and waters of that mammoth storm. I marvel at the spirit of those dear people in the face of what they are enduring.

We want to know, to understand and to see what’s coming up, so we try to make God predictable and safe. But I believe that God is saying, “Your future is secure. Now come with me on a wild and wonderful ride as I build my kingdom with those I call out to be the people of YHWH.” No, David, says the Lord, you will not build a house for me, but I’ll tell you what I am going to do...

B. The Promise of a Future

“Now then, tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture and from following the flock to be ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men of the earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.

“‘The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.’” (2 Sam 7:8-13)

God says, David, I took you from the pasture to the throne. Let’s remember the order of things here! I have been with you, not you with me. You are the responder. Not only that, it is I who has cut off your enemies. While I made you a great warrior, it is I who has brought victory. Six times God uses I – YOU in verses 8-12 expressing great

intimacy with David while giving him this promise. That is so like God, isn't it? Who else can love us with the tenderness of a mother, discipline us with the strength of a father, and expand our world beyond what our wildest dreams can conjure?

YHWH's words of refusal to David are followed by reminders of his care and faithfulness and even more by a promise that enlarges David's world and gives him a new lens on what YHWH is doing. David's plan is replaced by God's plan which transcends time and space, nations and cultures. "What God is about to give is not a tangible material object,"² but a greater, more transcendent reality. YHWH takes David beyond what any physical temple would do. David sets out to be the hero, but God turns things upside-down. The implications are clear, David has a future and its foundation, infrastructure, style and substance are one and the same: YHWH.

Jan Fokkelman points out that what we see here is that God's primary interest has nothing to do with houses, but has everything to do with the welfare and future of his people! YHWH references the time of the Judges (v. 11) when he first appointed them to be shepherds over his people to lead them back to safety from places of danger. He now desires for David to become a greater shepherd in the dynasty he will build through him! Four times God refers to "my people Israel." God has chosen his partner—he loves them, identifies with them and is committed to them.³

So it's not about David building for God. David's role as King is to shepherd the people with care and passion as a shepherd leads his flock, rescuing them from danger and leading them to pastures of goodness in the service of YHWH. The King is to serve the people, not the other way around. The kingdom will be great and everlasting, but it is a kingdom to be characterized by God's love and mercy, not by dominance and intimidation.

So, what does all of this have to do with Christmas? Where is the Advent message in this? Let us see where this all lands. While the Davidic dynasty did indeed last for 400 years, we all know that Israel fell. The Babylonian exile wiped out Israel's sovereignty and effectively killed the dynasty. So, either YHWH was wrong, failed to keep his promise, or else the promise was something that transcends earthly kingdoms. So, was the promise kept? If so, how did it look? Let's turn to Luke 2:

Back To The Future

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good

news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

**"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."**

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." (Luke 2:8-25)

If it were left to us to announce the coming of the special one and the inauguration of a new kingdom, there is no doubt we would counsel God to do it quite differently. The town of Bethlehem was a small, backwater place far from the lights and energy of Jerusalem. This is Pascagoula, Mississippi, not Manhattan. If you want big, you go to Manhattan, or at least San Francisco, Los Angeles or Chicago. But suddenly, we realize what YHWH is doing. He is simply acting as he indicated he would in his promises to David. Messiah has not come to the house of David the king; he has come to the house of David the shepherd. Christ has come not to rule with an iron scepter, but to serve with rod and staff.

Then, in case we don't fully get it, we stop and think to whom the announcement was made. To kings? No! To shepherds! Lowly, disregarded, dirty, smelly, earthy shepherds! The King of the Universe proclaimed to the most humble of men.

Then we think of the town itself, in particular its name. Bethlehem, *bet lechem*—"House of Bread." The house of bread becomes the arrival-place of the Bread of Life. God is so great. Who thinks of this stuff other than God himself? I love being a Christian. What a thrill to watch God work in wild and wonderful ways and to be used by him in the midst of it.

This Christmas week, there are three thoughts from these texts that I'd like us to consider.

Reflections

Remember, God's desire for his people is not to produce great earthly achievements, though there is nothing wrong with those. God's primary desire is for his people to be shepherds, to lead and care, to be agents of grace and mercy and the love of Jesus in all arenas and environments.

Secondly, we must resist the temptation to put God in a box, to try to put our own expectations on him—how he should bless us, what he should do for us, how he should act. YHWH will be YHWH and he invites us to come along for

a wild, adventurous and life-changing ride. As Andy says in the movie *Shawshank Redemption*, “Get busy living, or get busy dying.” Are we ready to release our agenda and embrace God’s? Are we ready to let him take over and lead us to places beyond our wildest dreams?

Finally, I pray that this Christmas we can find rest. We labor so hard to please God and others with our creations and work. May we stop and gain a new lens. Work is good, but like David, we need to ask the question: is it born out of our desire to please God, ourselves and others, when what God really desires for us is to rest and to live fully in submission to him? Will we allow him to produce through us that which carries the weight of eternity? Or will we insist on producing under our own power that which is temporal and earthbound?

May we be like the shepherds this Christmas: humbly about the business that God has given us, but able to stop, stand in awe and rejoice at the coming of the Savior. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men.”

1. J.P. Fokkelman, *Throne and City* (vol. 3 of *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*; Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1990), 215.

2. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 229.

3. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 219.

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