

God-Bearer
Advent 4B
PPC
20 December 2020

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Luke 1:26-38

It is helpful to remember when reading this passage from 2 Samuel 7 that it did not actually come together at a time when “the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him.” Instead, it came together during the Babylonian captivity. There was no rest, no house, and no king. When we understand that, our questions may begin to flow. Can this passage make sense to the defeated? Can the God described in 2 Samuel 7 be the same God that is worshiped in exile? What are the signs that God is present in Babylon?

Certainly, during exile, it can feel as if God is absent, impotent, or cruel. To be asked to worship this God of 2 Samuel 7 while in exile can feel like an act of delusion or masochism. Having survived four years of what felt like exile to many of us and then having to confront the economic and personal horrors of a pandemic, we all might relate well to these feelings. Where has God gone?

The covenant established in this passage is unconditional. Unlike 1 Kings 5:3 in which David is not allowed to build the temple because he is a warrior, God’s word to David here is that he should not build the temple because God doesn’t want David to build it now. However, God will build David a house. That house of David will go on forever. This word of God has more to do with God’s freedom than with the blood on David’s hands.

Today’s Gospel reading mentions David twice: Joseph is “of the house of David” (1:27) and Mary’s son will be “called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will

give to him the throne of his ancestor David” (Luke 1:32). David’s importance to the story of our faith is indisputable. It is this bloodline connection that in the end terrifies the religious authorities and the Roman oppressors the most during Holy Week.

When David is planning and hoping to build the temple, it is at a time when David has only recently solidified his control over all Israel and Judah and with his own personal troops has captured Jerusalem, which lies outside the established boundaries of Israel and Judah. His capital, then, is truly “the city of David”, a new addition to the united kingdom. After its capture, David, with great fanfare and dancing, has now brought the ark of God into the city. The importance of this act cannot be overestimated. The king is paying honor to the ancient stories of the tribes while establishing a monarchy that departs significantly from the old models of tribal leadership. He is identifying the religious cult of his people with the political and military dynasty he intends to found.

We know that eventually Solomon, David’s son, will build the temple. But after saying yes to the building of the temple, Nathan has a dream that puts the kibosh on David building it. At first, both the prophet and the king have misread the mind of God. David and Nathan misconceive the character and purpose of the One whom they worship. Honoring Nathan’s dream, however, the temple is not built.

The king and the prophet discover that they are in the presence of One who confounds human expectations and surprises even the faithful - or especially the faithful. Beware those who claim to know so well what it is that God knows or wants. How often do the self-proclaimed faithful presume to know how God is acting because it is the way God *must* act.

Our God is not captive to human expectations and who - not only once upon a time, but time and again - scatters “the proud in the thoughts of their hearts,” and “brings down the powerful from their thrones, fills “the hungry with good things,” and sends “the rich away empty” (Luke 1:51-53).

The promise to David that “your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever” (2 Sam. 7:16) proves to be a false assurance, for David’s dynasty falls about 400 years later. From the retelling of the story of David’s ascent and success in the time of exile, the identification between the Davidic monarchy and the cult of YHWH was solidified. It gave birth in the times of oppression to a messianic hope that is firmly attached to the notion of the continuity of David’s line. The longed-for Messiah must be of the house of David and is expected to mimic David’s military and political success. He was to liberate the Judeans from the domination of the Roman foreigners and restore the monarchy - the monarchy that has been symbolized and remembered by the presence of the temple (the Lord’s house) connected with the physical palace (David’s house) in Jerusalem. The Messiah would usher in the kingdom of God.

During Advent we are called to open our eyes, ears, hearts, and minds to the God who acts apart from our expectations.

Ernesto Cardenal’s *The Gospel in Solentiname* records the discussions of Gospel readings that were held among the campesinos, farmers and fisherfolk who lived in the country around Lake Nicaragua. When they read this text of Gabriel and Mary, it is recorded that these folk heard Gabriel speaking not only to Mary but also to them. They heard the angel saying that this savior, liberator, is going to be born among them, the people who were poor. “It’s not the rich but the poor who need liberation,”

says one. “The rich and the poor will be liberated,” answers another. “Us poor people are going to be liberated from the rich. The rich are going to be liberated from themselves, that is, from their wealth. Because they’re more slaves than we are.”¹

What does it mean to be blessed or favored of God?

We Protestants don’t preach or write much about Mary, the Blessed One. After all, we believe in the priesthood of all believers and none of us is set apart in this way. She does lead the way, though, for all of us sinful, embodied saints in showing us the mysterious reality that we are inescapably included in the work of God. John Calvin wrote that rather than Gabriel’s identification of Mary as “favored” she is better described as being the “happy one” who has received “the undeserved” love of God.

Popular thought today often assumes that God’s favor is earned by our good behavior, in either the moral or the political arena, or both. In other words, this thinking goes, God’s favor comes to those who give something to God; or conversely, the ones blessed by God are those who have the power to bless God back. And yet, God seems to choose Mary precisely because she has nothing. She is a young girl in a society that values men and maturity. Her pregnancy could have ended up in her being stoned to death. She is not one who is favored in the human realm but God has shown her favor.

Mary’s obedience is neither optional nor forced. She did not seek to be in this position. Mary offers herself freely, though, when she offers herself as a servant of the Lord. This choice relates directly to our lives if we consider situations in which we have found ourselves that we didn’t choose but nevertheless resign ourselves to the reality of what is happening. In the end, isn’t that the choice we are offered? After my divorce,

¹ from *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1*, pg. 95 quoting: Ernesto Cardinale, *The Gospel of Solentiname*, vol 1, trans. Donald D. Walsh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), 14.

I remember thinking that I could go on in life as an angry and bitter woman or I could say “Alright, God, this has happened to me. I choose to live my life knowing that you are with me.”

In the fifth century there was great debate on Mary as Theotokos, or God Bearer. God’s entry into the womb of the virgin Mary changes forever understandings of God that dismiss the divine vulnerability as inconsistent with the divine omnipresence. This image of a vulnerable womb can be used for both sexes. For within us, God will find a way to enter, barge into our lives and meddle with our affairs. If we’re accepting, something new will be born. Not always a comforting thought.

As the story unfolds Mary acts as a creative partner and agent with God in the coming of the life of the Christ child. In the specificity of this myth, we are invited to take a look at who we are and what we do in relation to God and God’s work. The Creator of the universe burst into a particular time and place in the form of a particular person, Jesus of Nazareth. In what theologians call the “scandal of particularity” we must reflect that it can offend our sensibilities - will God enter our lives in such a way?

Perhaps more daunting, though, is the idea of the God of immanence - God with us. We sing of this during the Advent and Christmas seasons as we wait and wonder at the child born in Bethlehem who is “God with us.” While there is a contemporary concern that Mary has been violated by the Holy Spirit, perhaps we should take this into consideration, also. It’s an unsettling interpretation but perhaps we Christian believers might consider how God’s call *does* violate the selves we imagined ourselves to be in the first place.

The journey to Bethlehem is coming to an end. We are near the place where the Christ child is born. Every year, we wait anew. We long for the love that shines down on us, bringing warmth and hope. In the words of that great call hymn, "Take my life and let it be, consecrated, Lord, to thee." The adventure begins - the Child is born. Will you allow the child to be born in you? Be prepared - buckle your seatbelt - it's sure to be a bumpy ride.

AMEN.