

Sunday December 24th, 2023
Advent IV

Luke 1:26-38
“Waiting on the Threshold”

As a reminder of what is coming, I present to you a timely poem to prepare us for the inevitable.

*‘Tis the day after Christmas and inside and out,
The holiday carnage lies scattered about.
And Ma with a wet towel atop of her head
And aspirin tablets has crawled into bed.
The kiddies, God bless ‘em, are raising a din,
With thundering drums and shrill trumpets of tin.
While Pa, like a schoolboy, forgetting his years,
Is all tangled up in the bicycle gears.
Old Duffer, the dachshund, delightfully smug,
Lies gnawing a carcass upon the new rug.
And Muffet, the kitten, despairing of a lap,
On the dining room table is taking her nap.
Plaid neckties and pink socks and what-nots galore
Await their exchange at the five-and-ten store.
While tidbits and knick-knacks of leftover sweets
Must furnish the menu for future-day eats.
‘Tis the day after Christmas, and once every year
Folks willingly pat for their holiday cheer.
With toothaches from candy and headaches from bills,
They call up the doctor and order more pills. (1001 Humourous Illustrations. P. 60)*

It’s almost Christmas. We hit critical mass somewhere this last week before the day itself. We run on overload, or we try to find a little bit of magic, a little miracle working to make it all come out the way we hope and pray that it will. Those seem to be our choices in this season, don’t they? Overwhelmed, or by the skin of our teeth. Why? Because it is Christmas. That’s the answer we give, and we get when we ask, which doesn’t really help. It’s almost the same as saying, “because I said so!”

Why do we do it? Well, because company is coming, and we want the house to look nice. Now, that might sound shallow, but it is what motivates us. Appearances. It’s not supposed to sound shallow, because there is something important going on there. In the desire to present a welcoming home, a home of joy and light, full of the sights and sounds and smells of the season, there is something profound being said about the nature of Christmas itself.

Appearances. How would it look if someone showed up before you got everything spruced up? How would it look if you were found with the boxes from the attic not put away, and the decorations strewn across the floor, and the kitchen a mess because the kids had to “help” with the baking, and the cat knocking the ornaments off the tree with abandon, and the tempers running short, and the strain beginning to show, and “if you push replay on ‘Jingle Bell Rock’ one more time I’m not going to be responsible for my actions!” How would it look?

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That was essentially the question that David asked in second Samuel. He was relaxing in his Lazy-Boy throne, watching the Philistines losing to the Amalekites in the fourth quarter, and he happens to glance out the window into the backyard and sees what God has been living in since he moved back from wherever it was that he got stolen to; and he thought, “How does this look?”

Here I am living in my brand-new house, with the full finished basement, full baths on every floor, walk-in closets and three-chariot garage, and there’s God living in a pop-up trailer in my backyard. There’s something not right here.” Or maybe it was his grumpy wife Michael, who told him she didn’t like the look of God’s camper next to her rose bushes, and ever since God strung those lights up on the canopy it is starting to look like a trailer park out there.

How does it look to have me in here and God out there? Not good, was his conclusion. So, David says, well, we just got to build God a house. And Nathan, who runs messages back and forth from the camper in the back into the palace, says, “Good idea!”

At least until he trundles out to the backyard and has a word with God. And God says “no”. No to a new temple, God indicates he is kind of partial to the pop-up camper. He likes being able to go where the people are; he likes to be on the move; he doesn’t want to be tied down with the maintenance worries that home ownership brings. He prefers to be able to run out in front to head off the bad guys at the pass.

“And by the way”, God indicates, “who is the one in the home building business anyway? Wasn’t it I who led you home to the Promised Land? Wasn’t it I who made you safe enough to build your tri-level ranch style palace anyway?”

“I’m the one in the home-establishing business, not you. In fact, you might say, that is my main motivating factor in all this chosen people stuff in the first place, to make a home, a home for you and my people and through you to make a home for the whole world.” God says, “Come home.” That’s the offer God makes to David. “Come home, home to me, home to your true self, home to your true family.”

That’s what God is really talking about, *home*. But not buildings. David is talking about building a house, and God wants to talk about finding a home. That’s the critical lesson here. God built in all of us this desire for home. And maybe at Christmas, this desire for home is a little bit stronger, or a little bit closer to the surface. As the old Christmas song goes, “I’ll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams”.

And sometimes, and Hollywood has made several movies on this theme over the years, we must move heaven and earth to get there. And it upsets our routines, and we will wonder on occasion whether it is worth it, and yet we go, or they come, or we find a new place.

God told David that David wasn’t going to build God a home, and then it said in the verses we skipped over, that David’s son was going to do it. Then later, David and everyone thought that God was talking about Solomon, because Solomon did indeed build the temple as a home for God. At least that’s what everyone thought God meant.

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Everyone, but Luke that is. Luke reminds us that God had different ideas than the rest of us did. Solomon's temple was quite a structure, and God apparently liked it well enough. Well enough to visit, but it was never really God's home, or so it seems. For one thing it was always called Solomon's temple. No, God had a different son in mind, when he said, "Your son will build my home."

Jesus also tried to drive this point home, that God's home does not include stone, or mortar, steel, or wood. Remember in John four. Jesus engages in an in-depth theological discussion with the woman at the well. The dialogue delves into the argument between Samaritans and Jews about the location of the real temple. The real house of God. What does Jesus say to her, really to all of us.

"Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem...But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4:21, 23-24)

When Gabriel speaks to Mary, he indicates that God's offer of home was all about the one we would call, "the Son of the Most High," the one that would "reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there would be no end." That's the son who would build God's home. No one quite got that. David didn't really understand what God meant. Solomon didn't really understand either, but he got the construction crew out anyway. No one knew what God really meant— no one, but Mary.

But then the indications are that Mary didn't really fully understand either. How could she? Just imagine, this young, unmarried, soon-to-be married girl, gets a message from God. And the message is, God's coming home. Taking up residence. Not in a temple, but in her. Excuse me?

This nothing special, backwoods, teenager, was going to be God's home for a few months. And talk about your troubling house guests! Feet on the furniture are nothing compared to this. Those who are mothers, who have experienced the joy of pregnancy and birth know better than the rest of us the hard realities of this little event. We are here a few days before Christmas talking about Mary finding out she's going to be pregnant, and then Wednesday night, she gives birth.

Pretty amazing, really, but somehow it does seem real. We forget to quickly that Mary carried this load just like every woman before and since; she hurt, and she sweated, and she paced and she groaned and she struggled and she wondered and she worried and she bled and she gave birth in a barn because no one was willing to give her a bed. "Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you." Excuse me?

The Lord has a different idea of favoritism than we do. The Lord has a different idea of blessing than we do. The Lord has a different idea of home than we do. "Come home," says the Lord to us at Christmas time. "Come home." David wanted to build a house for God on the tallest hill in Jerusalem, where God could be removed and distant and overlook all the people who would have to go out of their way to give obedience to God. But God wanted to build his home a little closer to the deep realities of living in this world so that we would be surprised by God where we live.

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God wanted to build his home where we sweat and labor, where we work and play, where we laugh and cry, where our hearts are lifted and often broken and sometimes healed.

David wanted God's home on a mountain, but God wanted his home in the womb of a virgin, in the feed box behind an inn in the little town of Bethlehem. God wanted his home in the backwoods region of Galilee, on the roads of the countryside, in the grassy place where five thousand sat and ate their fill. God wanted his home in the birthing units and wedding celebrations and the dinner parties. God wanted his home in the tear-filled bedrooms and sick beds and the graveyards of his children.

God wanted his home in the court rooms and prison cells and then on the streets of sorrow of Jerusalem and the dark hill called Calvary. God wants his home in your home, in the living rooms and kitchens and playrooms and bedrooms of your life. God calls to us at Christmas and says, "Greetings, favored ones! I'm coming home, coming home for Christmas. Is there room for me in your crowded, busy lives? Is there room for me?" And like any baby born in our midst, he says, "I won't take up much room, just all that you have. Is there room for me? I'm coming home." And the Holy Spirit waits for our answer.