

Advent 4B
Peace, Seattle
December 21, 2014
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38

GOD'S HABITAT IN HUMANITY

It was **Habitat for Humanity Saturday**, and the build was on. But this one would be different from many—instead of a group of volunteers building a house over a period of weeks, this **one-day blitz-build** would involve **professional teams** who'd take the house from foundation to finish in a single day.

Crews would put in 4-hour shifts, then hand the job over—like a relay team—to the next outfit, until the last board was nailed & the last fixture was installed. When our crew from Tappe Construction arrived at first light, the basement foundation was capped, and from then on it was a race to the finish.

You could feel the testosterone flow as crews jockeyed for turf on the single-family home. It was nailed or be nailed as, first, the walls and then the roof went up; while inside the plumbing, wiring and heating ducts were laid out.

By midmorning the framing was done. By noon the windows were in and the siding was on. By suppertime the roof was complete and the sheetrock was up. And before the day was over, that house was built.

There's a theme connecting our first reading from Samuel with our gospel reading from Luke – and it has to do with HABITAT. Not HABITAT FOR HUMANITY, but rather HABITAT FOR GOD.

In 2nd Samuel, David, the newly enthroned King of a newly united nation, chooses Jerusalem for his capital and has a new house built—a house that's truly fit for a king.

Reclaiming the Arc of the Covenant, that great symbol of God's abiding presence, David brings it to his new capital, installs it in a tent—its habitat during 40 years of wilderness wandering—and then begins to muse about the fact that while he now has a permanent home, the ark of God does not. **And this just doesn't seem right.**

Nathan gives David the green light to construct a permanent home for God's presence. But when God himself chimes in, what David hears is quite different from what Nathan had said.

The condensed version goes something like this:

So you want to build me a house, eh? Did I ever ask you to build me a house?

I the LORD haven't needed a house before and I don't need one now, thank you very much.

Remember David, I was the one who took you, a snot-nosed kid tending sheep, and made you the head of my kingdom. **You build me a house? No...I'm going to make of you a house!**

A house that will last longer than any building; I'll establish your line forever.

David wants a HABITAT for God, and God says, NO, I'LL MAKE YOU MY HABITAT INSTEAD. YOU will be MY DWELLING PLACE THROUGH ALL GENERATIONS.

And now, fast forward a thousand years to a small Galilean village called Nazareth, where a messenger named Gabriel and a young woman named Mary are about to make their entrance. Have you ever wondered what Mary was up to the day Gabriel came? Was she washing clothes or hanging laundry? At the well getting water? Working in the fields? Tending goats? Kindling a fire?

Helping with dinner? If Luke knew, he's not telling. So it's left to our imaginations to fill in the blanks, and, as I've noted recently, many artists, poets and filmmakers have.¹

Poet Rosario Castellanos, in her poem, NAZARETH, says it this way:²

...I think of Mary, chosen vase.
Like any cup, easily broken;
like all vessels, too small
for the destiny she must contain.

My favorite depiction of this scene in film is Zeffirelli's classic "Jesus of Nazareth."³

In the still of the night Mary is woken from sleep by a brilliant light streaming through the small window of her peasant home. Frightened at first by this unearthly Presence she hides in the shadows.

But then, slowly and deliberately, curiosity moves her beyond fear to ask "Who are you?!"

Moving by degrees into the fullness of the light, Mary is privy to a Voice she alone hears. And the message sinks in—YOU, MARY, HAVE BEEN CHOSEN TO BE GOD'S HABITAT—GOD'S DWELLING PLACE.

In those moments between Gabriel's message, and Mary's response, her life, her future, everything she had known, everything she had allowed herself to think her life might become, is shaken, altered, turned upside down. And in that sacred silence, she affirms that Gabriel has announced her true vocation.

And slowly sinking to her knees, Mary accepts this new calling with humility and grace.

God walks the tightrope, heaven comes to earth, chooses a particular woman—too small for the destiny she must contain, too easily broken—as all things human are.

The Creator of the Universe enters the confines of Mary's womb; she will be God's habitat on Earth.

It's tempting, when we pick up the paper or watch the news, to think that the broken human condition will never be healed or overturned. But Luke tells us that not only is it possible—the seed has already been planted; the cells are dividing; it's already begun!

And this, I think, is the most problematic thing about this story—its specificity:

THIS sign, THIS location, THIS moment, THIS woman, THIS child. God's habitat is HERE.

We're more comfortable with the wiggle room that generalities provide; for then we can tell the story in ways that suit us. But the gospel invites us to embrace the bold particularity of God's vision, as it takes shape here, in Nazareth, with Mary.

What does it mean to be chosen as a place, a habitat, where God will dwell?

David's line, with all its gifts and liabilities—public and private—remained for God a dwelling place.

¹ See my *Pastor's Pen* article for December 2014: <http://www.peacelutheranseattle.org/?p=2070>

² *The Gospels in Our Image*, David Curzon, ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1995) p. 10.

³ You can watch the scene from the film unfold [HERE](#).

And Luke will tell us all too soon what it will mean for Mary—“a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

But what of you and I? Is there a sense in which we, too, are being tapped to become habitats—dwelling places—for God?

The answer is YES. Brother Martin puts it this way:

“...one of the exceedingly great promises granted to us...[is] that we...should...not only to be loved by God through Christ Jesus...but should even have the Lord himself dwelling completely in us.”
For we are “indeed called and made the habitation of God.”⁴

Luther says it straight but poet Gerard Manley Hopkins says it best:

Of her flesh he took flesh: He does take fresh and fresh,
Though much the mystery how, Not flesh but spirit now
And makes, O marvelous! New Nazareths in us,
Where she shall yet conceive Him, Morning noon and eve:
New Bethlems, and He born there, evening, noon and morn.

Through the centuries the church has elevated Mary to a position far beyond anyone human. Which is too bad. For as long as she’s kept away up there on a pedestal, above and beyond us, so, too, will Jesus be...when God’s whole point was not to remain above but to be here below.

So much so, that not only is the Earth now—her soil and air, her waters, womb and blood—the habitat of God, we, too, are that habitat.

For we have been birthed anew in that Spirit-infused water; and have taken into ourselves—and will again this day—the bread which is his body; the wine which is his blood.

On this day, the shortest day of the year, with the longest night to follow, on this day, the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it.

He has a home now in us, you see. And we, fragile vessels, bear his sacred presence in our bodies, our lives, this community. We are the “new Bethlems, and He born there, evening, noon and morn.”

Shocking, isn’t it? More than a wee bit unnerving and exhilarating; terrifying and true.

So, sisters and brothers, how does it feel to be the vessels that bring God to the world?

Let us pray:

That you gave up heaven for Earth we say, WOW.
That Mary said YES to your call, we say, THANKS.
That her response might become our own we say, AMEN.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Third Sermon for Pentecost Sunday*. Cited in Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Public Church: For the Life of the World*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), p. 51.