

4th Sunday in Advent

II Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Luke 1:26-38; Romans 16:25-27

The fourth Sunday of Advent traditionally focuses upon the nativity of Christ, with a particular emphasis upon Mary and/or prophecies concerning Christ's birth. It does not center upon the birth itself because, of course, that is the topic of Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and the next Sunday – the first Sunday in Christmastide.

II Samuel 7:1-11, 16 is the primary statement in scripture presenting God's covenant with King David. The making of this covenant is occasioned by David's desire to build a temple for Yahweh. The king says to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent" (2:2). David apparently understands that the construction of a palace for himself is a clear statement of his now-well established rule (5:11, 12). Therefore, he proposes that God's rule should be similarly symbolized with a permanent dwelling.

Nathan responds to David, "Do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you" (vs. 3). But Yahweh does not agree. "That same night", God speaks to Nathan. And what he speaks is a most powerful statement.

"Go, and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I 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. Wherever 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?" Now 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; and 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. . . . I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house!" (7:5-9, 11)

God is saying quite simply to David, "Stop trying to domesticate me!" As long as the people of Israel were mobile, then I, the Lord God, was mobile. My presence was represented to Israel as always being within their midst, "living" in a tent and tabernacle that could be packed up and moved with the people. Now, you have conquered Israel's greatest foes, secured her borders, expanded Israel into an empire, captured a supposedly-impregnable city and made it your capital, and have built yourself a fine palace. Well and good! But you cannot confine Me to a temple, no matter how glorious and beautiful it might be. Another person will build me a "house", but that temple will not contain me. I will go where I want to go and do what I want to do. For I am Yahweh – he who causes to be what is caused to be, not he who is domesticated by political, economic or religious systems and leaders. So I will not accept a house at your hand.

But then Yahweh makes an intriguing play on words! He states to and through Nathan, "You, David, are not to build me a house (a temple). But I will build you a house (a dynasty)!" And it will be that dynasty that will be important both to the future of Israel and to all humanity. The temple ultimately built for me will not last. It will crumble and be destroyed. It will be replaced

two times and will be twice destroyed. But the dynasty I create will be everlasting and will shape humanity for all times!

“Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me, (says the Lord). Your throne shall be established forever” (7:16). This is God’s promise to David. The importance of this covenant can scarcely be exaggerated. This promise of an enduring Davidic kingdom fulfills the promise God made to Abraham and to his seed (Genesis 17:16). It makes clear the rationale for the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery and their being shaped into a nation around the Ten Commandments given to Moses. And it looks forward to the completion of this covenant in the Messiah (Isaiah 9:1-7). It is the establishment of God’s reign, the world as God intends it to be, upon the earth. This is the importance of this covenant made between God and David – a covenant, not to accept a house from David’s hand, but to build a house upon David that will lead to the salvation and liberation of the world.

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26 is a psalm that deals with God’s covenant with King David and his successors. As such, it divides itself into four parts. Part I (vss. 1-18) present the awesome power of God as it is demonstrated through God’s nation – the power of the creator God who arbitrarily chose Israel to be his people. It begins with the great lines (perhaps the best lines of the Psalm), “I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens” (vss. 1-2). As well, it introduces the primary theme of this psalm – God’s covenant with David and his successors. “You (God) said, ‘I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David’” (vs. 3). And then it speaks the actual words of the covenant: “I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations” (vs. 4).

Part II (vss. 19-37) develops more fully the covenant made between God and David. It states, “Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one, and said, ‘I have set the crown on one who is mighty; I have exalted one chosen from the people. I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have anointed him; my hand shall always remain with him; my arm also shall strengthen him’” (vss. 19-21). The psalmist presents in detail God’s commitment to David, and then concludes, “I will establish his line forever, and his throne as long as the heavens endure” (vs. 29).

But it is likely, the Psalmist recognizes, that the kings who follow David may not remain faithful to the covenant God made with David. “If his children forsake my law and do not walk according to my ordinances, if they violate my statutes and do not keep my commandments, then I will punish their transgression – but I will not remove from him my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness” (vss. 30-33). Certainly, each king in the Davidic dynasty will be expected to remain faithful to Yahweh and just towards the people – and severe punishment will come upon those kings who don’t remain faithful. But even though they may be faithful, “I will not remove from (the king) my steadfast love, or be false to my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant, or alter the word that went forth from my lips (vss. 33-34). Instead, “his line shall continue forever, and his throne endure before me like the sun” (vs. 36).

Part III (vss. 38-45) deals with the shame that has come upon Israel and the monarchy due to the faithlessness, greed and lust for power of the kings who come after David. The result has been Israel's defiance of the king and the overthrow of his authority (this is likely a reference to the revolt against the monarch during Rehoboam's reign and the creation of the northern kingdom, as ten of the twelve tribes abandoned the Davidic monarchy).

Part IV (vss. 46-52) is the Psalmist's plea to God. "How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire" (vs. 46)? It is the Psalmist's prayer that God would restore the Davidic monarchy. If this Psalm was written during the time of the divided kingdom, then it is a plea for its reunion. If, on the other hand, it was written during or after the Exile, then it is a plea for the return of a Davidic monarch to the throne. Of course, neither happened! But a far greater fulfillment of this covenant was about to happen with the birth of a peasant boy in a Bethlehem stable!

Luke 1:26-38 is the Annunciation in which the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her that it is God's wish that she bear the Messiah. In announcing to her that she will bear a son whose name is to be Jesus (i.e., "Yahweh is salvation"), Gabriel goes on to say, "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (1:32-33).

What is intriguing in this statement is that Gabriel draws directly on the language of II Samuel 7:11-16 and Psalm 89. Gabriel presents Jesus as the actualization of Yahweh's promise to David to create an everlasting dynasty. In this announcement, Yahweh has completed the promise made to Abraham, the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery, the shaping of Israel into a nation of Godly justice, equitable distribution of wealth and the building of a relational culture, the securing of that nation in the person of David, and the preservation of the Davidic dynasty down a thousand years to this point where it reaches fulfillment in the birth of the King of kings!

Gabriel has made a momentous announcement – that Jesus will be the fulfillment and completion of the process begun with Abraham and reaching its apex in David. He is declaring that God's kingdom is about to be established on earth through this soon-to-be-born Jesus. His birth will bring to realization God's shalom community upon the earth – the achievement of the world as God intended it to be – humanity living in justice, sharing wealth and in radical relationship with God and each other. That denouement has now commenced with Mary being with child!

In the midst of such a momentous announcement, Mary's response almost seems anticlimactic. But it is extremely practical. "How can this be, since I am a virgin!" That's cutting to the chase! And it reveals to us a great deal about Mary.

Luke 1:27 tells us that Mary was "betrothed" to Joseph and was a virgin. That actually tells us a great deal about Mary. Betrothal was a legal promise that was a precursor to marriage. In Jewish practice, a girl was betrothed at between ten and twelve years of age. She was normally married to her intended husband once she reached twelve and a half years of age. Since Mary was a virgin, this is an indication that she hadn't been married before. It is therefore reasonable

to assume that she was betrothed at the age all virgin daughters of Israel were betrothed, and that she married Joseph between twelve and thirteen years of age (when, at thirteen, it was considered appropriate for her to engage in sexual intercourse).

What this means is that Mary was quite young – likely around twelve years of age – when the angel Gabriel visited her with the news that she was to bear the Messiah. He has shared with her the momentous nature of the announcement made to her – that history was reaching its denouement in the birth of the Christ. And Mary has both the innocence and temerity to fixate on the practical! “How can this be? I’m a virgin!” Her question reflects both her youth and her naiveté. And she is forgiven for that blunt innocence (as opposed to Zechariah, who ought to have been old enough to have known better, cf. 1:18-20).

That Mary was responding out of the innocence and lack of sophistication of youth is seen in her immediate response to the angel’s answer, “For nothing will be impossible with God” (1:37). Mary responds, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (1:38). God said it! I believe it! That takes care of it! Thus grace came upon Mary. And the world’s salvation had begun!

Romans 16:25-27 is the concluding statement of Paul’s great theological work of the letter to the Church in Rome. In this final doxology, Paul encompasses the history of salvation and the missionary commission of the church that all nations might believe and obey the gospel. He accomplishes this by reminding the reader that the gospel “was kept secret for long ages, but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles” (vss. 25b-26a). Thus it is that Paul proclaims what we have now explored in the Old Testament and Gospel lessons for this Sunday in Advent – that now, in the light of Christ’s birth announced to a young peasant girl who wasn’t afraid to question God, the message already enshrined in the Old Testament is now being spread to and being realized in all the nations of the earth. God’s Kingdom is now coming upon the earth!

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