

The Foundation and the Cornerstone

2 Samuel 7:1-14a and Ephesians 2:11-22

King David wanted to build a house for God. Which, as good ideas go, seemed to be a no-brainer. Even to Nathan the Prophet, whose job description included pointing out to the king when something was NOT such a great idea in God's eyes. It seemed a shame to David that he himself lived in a stately cedar mansion, while the Ark of the Covenant—the holy artifact which symbolized God's presence—continued to be housed in a tent. Even a revered and fancy tent like the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle made a lot of sense when the Israelites were a mass of nomads trekking across the Sinai on their way to a Promised Land, and portable housing was a necessity. But these days they were settled and secure, and David grew embarrassed every time he looked out the window of his palace to behold God's modest abode. Who knew though, that God's tastes leaned more towards open roads and Winnebagos than McMansions?

That night though, God gave Nathan a “thanks, but no thanks” message to deliver to David; one which pointed out how God never asked David (or anyone else) for a housing upgrade. Instead, God promised to construct a house for David. Not a house built with brick and mortar, but one of flesh and blood. The Hebrew word for house in this passage is *Bet*. *Bet* can be translated a number of ways. It can mean physical dwelling place. It can also mean a palace or temple. Those are the definitions David and Nathan would have had in mind.

But *Bet* can also mean a different sort of house, other than a building. It can mean a household—the family that lives under the same roof—even a “royal dynasty.” *That* is the definition God was working from. God promised, “I will raise up your offspring after you, and I will establish his kingdom. *He* shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.”

Sure enough, David's son and successor, King Solomon, fulfilled that prophecy when he built the Temple that David dreamed of constructing. But the last part of the prophecy did not come true. The monarchy did not last forever. And the Temple that David conceived and Solomon constructed would eventually be destroyed, rebuilt, destroyed, rebuilt and destroyed again. Today, only the western wall of the Temple still stands in Jerusalem. But it is still a place where people come to pray. Only centuries after the Temple was ruined and the Dynasty David began ceased to be, did the prophecy come to pass. And it did so, in some most unexpected ways. Beginning with the unconventional birth of a obscure descendant of David, in the same place where David himself had been born—*Bethlehem*.

Christians would look back and see the prophecy of an offspring of David who enjoyed a unique father/son intimacy with God and whose kingdom would never end—fulfilled in the person of Jesus. And the Apostle Paul, in his Epistle to the Ephesians (and elsewhere) would compare the

communities of those who believed in and committed themselves to what Jesus called “the Kingdom of God” a temple. Not a temple of built of brick and mortar, but of flesh, blood and Spirit. Not a Temple conceived by human imagination or constructed with human hands; but a dwelling created by God for humanity. Or, more accurately, a dwelling for God to dwell *with* humanity. What we call the Church of Jesus Christ.

To this day, when anyone joins themselves to this church, the liturgy of new membership directly quotes Paul as they are welcomed into fellowship with the words: “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the (*bet*) household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him, the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; In whom you also are being built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

This is some pretty high-churchy language, but it contains some significant down-to-earth lessons about what the Church is meant to be, and in many ways, what the Church still has yet to be. Like, what does it mean for the Church to be built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets? One thing it surely means is that the Church rests upon and is supported by what has been revealed to us by the testimony of those whose voices and experiences are preserved in Scripture. What we believe about God and what informs our perception of life is not the product of some passing fad. It possesses an authority that shapes our fundamental understanding of a reality and a power that transforms how we respond to the world around us. Strip the Church of its foundational beliefs and you are left with a social club.

And, what was Paul trying to say about the Church by describing Jesus as the cornerstone in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows? It may be that Paul was actually describing the capstone at the top of an arched entryway to a building. That keystone shaped block holds the integrity of the entrance. Remove it, and the doorway to the temple collapses and closes. Paul says that it is in Jesus that we have gained access to God. He reminds us that “once we were far off from God” relationally. But now we have been brought near--through the blood of Christ. It is said that the Jerusalem Temple was built on the place where Abraham came within moments of sacrificing his son Isaac on an altar. God intervened before Abraham carried out his intention, and God provided a ram to be sacrificed in Isaac’s place. There may be a connection between the practice of animal sacrifices routinely carried out during Temple worship and the substitutionary sacrifice of a ram offered in place of Isaac at that very location. Paul may have had that in mind when he associated the sacrificial death of Jesus with the portal through which we gain access to the living Temple that is the Church. Through Jesus, we are not only reconciled to God, but he is our interpretive key to understanding God’s love, mercy and compassion.

A third awareness that Paul’s use of Temple imagery provides is found in his focus on the Church as a place where division over differences takes a back seat to unity. The physical structure of the Jerusalem Temple intentionally accommodated separation. There was an outer

court which was as far as Gentiles were allowed to go. Then there were separate Courts for women and men, and a court that only priests were allowed to enter. Paul very likely had those Temple boundaries in mind when he claimed that, “[Jesus] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” He specifically names the lack of unity—the hostility—that existed in the church then between Jewish and Gentile believers.

It was a noble aspiration that inspired King David’s desire to build a house for God. Millions of churches have been raised since then, with equally noble motives. But a building alone does not make a church. Not unless it is inhabited by a people committed to and shaped by, the truth passed down by prophets and apostles. A people who acknowledges that their presence in this sacred household is possible solely through the grace of God. A grace most fully revealed in the sacrifice God’s only begotten Son made on your behalf and mine. Not everyone who looks at a church building however, associates the community that gathers under its roof as inclusive and welcoming. For some, steeples and bells are reminders of being shamed and rejected for who they are. Or being fed heavenly promises about “Pie in the sky by and by” as justifications for ignoring injustices they are enduring here and now.

Not being able to gather in this sanctuary for worship was experienced by many as a profound loss during the pandemic. A kind of exile that virtual worship could not replace. But within that sense of exile, we have also been given an opportunity and an invitation. An opportunity to appreciate not only in words, but in life experience, that wherever we are, we are the living stones that make up the structure that Christ calls home. And an invitation to be more deliberate and creative in reaching out to anyone who has been told that they are “strangers to the Promise” for which this building was built. To vigorously proclaim in no uncertain terms, for all who pass by to see, that in this house of God, the Foundation is solid, the doors are open by grace and dividing walls are being demolished.

© 2021 Raymond Medeiros

Preached FCCW, July 18, 2021