

## A DWELLING PLACE FOR GOD

### Fourth Sunday of Advent

*Readings:* 2 Sam 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16;  
Ps 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29; Rom 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

*“Nothing will be impossible for God” (Luke 1:37)*

As Christmas approaches, the readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent focus our attention on the notion of a dwelling place for God. In the first reading, King David finds himself free in that he no longer has to fight his enemies. Instead, he can devote his energy to whatever he likes, so he plans to build a beautiful palace for himself and a splendid temple for God. At first the prophet Nathan approves this plan, but then he hears a word from God that turns the plan upside down: “Should *you* build *me* a house to dwell in?” God then explains that all the success that David has had is God’s doing, which now culminates in God establishing a house, that is, a dynasty, for David. There is a play on the word “house,” as it shifts in meaning: from David’s palace to God’s temple to the Davidic ruling line. Underlying the text is a criticism of the monarchy.

In the verses omitted from the Lectionary selection (vv. 6-7a), God objects that YHWH has never asked any of the leaders of Israel to build a temple: “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.” God has been on the move, dwelling with the Israelites in the same way they themselves have lived—in makeshift tents as they traversed the desert between Egypt and Canaan. And God has been present in a portable tabernacle that they carried with them wherever they sojourned.

In the gospel reading, Gabriel’s message to Mary is that God now takes up residence in human flesh. While there is a place for magnificent temples and churches where we can gather as a people to glorify God, the Holy One would have us first recognize that divinity walks around in our midst in human skin. Moreover, those who are least impressive

by human standards are the most favored by God when it comes to revealing God's mystery. David, for example, was the youngest, the least qualified one, when God took him from pasturing his sheep to lead his people. Mary was an ordinary young woman making wedding plans in an insignificant little town in Galilee, when she was asked to take on a seemingly impossible role.

In both the first reading and the gospel, there is a startling twist: it is not we who make dwelling places for God but God who builds the house. Likewise, on Christmas Day, John's Gospel speaks not only of how wondrous it is that God takes on the form of a human child but also of how our reception of the Word enables us to become children of God. We keep on becoming children of God by receiving this lowly child, not only the one in the manger, but all the ones who seem insignificant around us.

The scene of the annunciation to Mary is the subject of much Christian art. Oftentimes Mary is portrayed as serenely praying, and surrounded with light and joy. But in the Lukan annunciation story there is an undercurrent of distress, incomprehension, and scandal. Henry Ossawa Tanner captures this sense in his painting "The Annunciation," in which Mary sits at the edge of her disheveled bed, with a look of puzzlement and concern, while gazing toward a golden beam in the form of a cross. Megan Marlatt's fresco "The Annunciation" in St. Michael's Chapel at Rutgers University likewise depicts the topsy-turvy aspect of the event, as the angel appears upside down, uttering the word "Blessed" backwards. Mary's life as she thought it would be is entirely upended, and this is greatly troubling.

What God is asking is incomprehensible. Mary questions how it can be. In addition, in her tiny village, where everyone knows everyone else, and many people are related to one another, everyone knows that she and the man who is already her legal husband have not yet begun to live together. And all of them can count to nine. What will they say about her, what kinds of nasty looks will they cast her way when her precious child is born too soon?

While not spelling out how, Gabriel reassures Mary that in the midst of this messy situation, God will bring forth blessing, holiness, and salvation for all. Twice God's messenger assures her that she is grace-filled and is favored in God's sight, even if others will question this. He also reassures her that she is not alone. Her relative, Elizabeth, will help mentor and support her. Without knowing how God will accomplish all this, Mary opens a space for God to dwell within her, enabling the divine to make a new home within all humankind.

Mary makes a physical home for the Holy One in her womb; hers was a unique role. But we too are asked by God to make a dwelling place within

ourselves and within our world for the Christ. The circumstances are always messy. It is not in glorious buildings beautifully adorned but in the humblest of persons, in the most difficult of circumstances, that God takes up residence. The irony is that in trying times we may feel abandoned by God, or question why it is that God is punishing us or why we have lost God's favor. It is precisely in such times that God dwells most intimately with us, assuring us that we are full of grace and favor, asking us to trust that God can and will bring forth blessing, even if we cannot see how.

### **PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE**

1. When have you experienced God dwelling with you in difficult circumstances?
2. When have you most felt favored by God?
3. Who reveals to you the mysterious presence of God in human flesh?

## GOD TENTING AMONG US

### The Nativity of the Lord

*Readings:* Isa 52:7-10;  
Ps 98:1, 2-3, 3-4, 5-6; Heb 1:1-6; John 1:1-18

*“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”* (John 1:14)

Some folks love to camp outdoors. They love to commune more closely with nature, cook their food over an open fire, and sleep out under the stars or in a portable tent. Others are not so keen on roughing it. The accustomed comforts of home are too alluring. Fear of wild animals or intruders inhibits the pleasure they might otherwise have outdoors. In the gospel today, the climactic verse 14 of the prologue of John exultantly proclaims that God likes to camp with us (the Greek verb *eskēnōsen* literally means “pitched his tent”). This is not a new message. During the wilderness wandering, ὙΠΩΧ’s presence was experienced in the tent of meeting (Exod 25:8; Num 35:34). Israel’s God was not thought of as remaining stationary in a temple but rather as traveling with the people throughout their desert sojourn. What is new is when the Holy One tents in human flesh, journeying with us in the most intimate way possible.

The first part of the gospel describes a cozy at-homeness that existed from the beginning between *Theos* (God) and the *Logos* (Word). The two share a oneness and together take delight in giving birth to all that came to be. (The Greek word *ginomai*, usually translated here as “came to be,” has this primary definition: “to come into being through process of birth or natural production, be born.”) Their intimacy is fruitful; their love does not stay at home in a closed circle but gives birth to all that lives. The supreme act of self-emptying love is the pouring forth of God’s love in the tent of human skin.

Just as leaving a sturdy home to camp in a nylon or canvas tent makes one vulnerable to the elements and to danger, so does Jesus’ donning of human flesh. John’s prologue already points toward the rejection and execution of Jesus. There would be those who would not recognize the Cre-

ator's love masked in human flesh. They miss the truth that the divine impulse is to become one with the most fragile of humanity. Jesus seeks out and identifies with those who camp on the edge of poverty, not so much those who live in fine palaces or luxurious dwellings. There are, however, those who do receive him, who believe in his name, to whom are given the power to become (*ginomai*) children of God, born (*egennēthēsan*) not by human means but of God (vv. 12-13).

Extraordinary things can occur when camping in the wilderness. Israel found that when God's tent was pitched with them in the desert, it was both a time of trial and of honeymoon. Stripped of any of the ordinary ways in which they might provide for themselves, they had to rely on their divine Provider even for their physical existence, depending on manna from heaven and water from rock. In the new divine act of "grace on top of grace" (John 1:16), Jesus himself becomes Bread for a hungry people and quenches all thirst, not only in the present, but for all ages (John 6:35).

The amazing thing is that, although the *Logos* has gone camping with humankind, he has not left the home he has with *Theos*. Even as he dwells with humanity, he is yet "at the Father's side" (*eis ton kolpon* is literally, "at the breast" or "bosom") (1:18). Here is another extraordinary image: not only are gender boundaries blurred as *Theos* and *Logos* are birthing children of God and all creation (vv. 3, 12-13), but the unique (*monogenēs*, "one of a kind") Son is at the "breast" of the Father—an image of ongoing unbreakable intimacy (v. 18). It is the same intimacy that is shared between Jesus and all his disciples, symbolized in the figure of the nameless Beloved Disciple, who at the Last Supper (13:23) reclines at Jesus' side (literally, "in the bosom," *en tō kolpō*, of Jesus).

In our celebration of Christmas we not only rejoice in God tenting with us in human form but as followers of Christ we too are invited out of our comfortable abodes to pitch our tent with the most vulnerable and needy, while resting always in our one permanent home: the bosom of the Holy One.

## PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

1. Rest in the bosom of Christ and listen to his love poured out to you.
2. What does Jesus' tenting with the most needy and vulnerable ask of you?
3. How does the fecundity of divine love give birth to new life in our communities of faith today?