

Sermon: Building a House

New North Church, Hingham

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20 December 2020

Based on **2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38; 2:8-14**

Throughout Advent, in a series of prophecies and proclamations, we have moved from talking about the end times and the expected arrival of the Messiah to celebrating the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, and there are more prophecies and visions involved that we haven't covered yet. But how do we get from King David wanting to build a house for God, who didn't want one, to the birth of Jesus?

For Christians, it makes perfect sense that this passage from 2 Samuel leads us directly to Jesus. Though they are separated by hundreds of years, King David and Jesus are part of the same family line. The Gospels tell us so. Both Matthew and Luke include genealogies – though they don't match exactly – that show how Jesus is related to David.

The passage from 2 Samuel is interesting for us because it speaks of literal and figurative houses that become very important to the Jesus story.

The Lord has given David rest from all his enemies and now the king has time to reflect. He says to Nathan, look, I live in a house of cedar – such a house implies durability, stability, and permanence. David points out that God lives in a movable tent; how is that fair? Nathan says, go ahead with your plan; God is with you.

But then the word of the Lord came to Nathan: Is David the one to build *me* a house? Who gave him permission to do that?

It turns out that building a dwelling for the gods was, in David's time, the culturally appropriate thing to do. David was your typical king in that he wanted to build a temple to YHWH for having given him his victories. A king would look inferior if he didn't build a proper temple for his god,¹ and David was no inferior king.

But God turns it around and reveals to David that it is the divine purpose to build an everlasting house and kingdom for *him*. From this and from David's descendants would come Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God, the Messiah.

Now let's look at Luke's Gospel to learn how that was done. There are only two origin stories in the New Testament, the other is in Matthew's Gospel.

In Matthew, Gabriel makes the annunciation to Joseph, in Luke, Gabriel visits Mary. Elsewhere in the Bible, similar birth announcements occur: in Genesis with Abraham and Sarah; to Samson's parents in Judges; in Isaiah (7:14), and again in Luke just before today's passage when Gabriel visits Elizabeth, Mary's kinswoman.

Things like this just don't happen. Luke is dealing with miracles here. John the baptizer's birth highlights the greater miracle of Jesus' birth. John's birth is considered a minor miracle because his parents, though they were elderly, were married and living together; nothing scandalous there. But Jesus' birth was by an unmarried woman.

The word describing Mary here as a virgin can mean, in Greek, *virgin*, *young girl*, or even *sweetheart*, if you're feeling romantic. All three could apply to Mary. By using this word, Luke emphasizes Mary's youth and the holiness of this conception.

Mary was perplexed by Gabriel's greeting, and who could blame her? He called her 'the favored one' and that might take some getting used to, plus, he's an angel.

She became even more perplexed when he told her that she will conceive a son. He didn't say when, only that she will. But she has no idea what will happen next. What will Joseph say? Her parents? Should she tell her friends?

When the angel departs from her, Mary is still perplexed but she is totally committed to what God has planned for her – "let it be with me according to your word."

Speaking of Joseph, though he's not mentioned here at all nor does he ever say a word in the story anywhere, his role is crucial. Joseph, as Luke reports in chapter 2, 'was descended from the house and family of David' (2:4). It's through Joseph that Jesus closes the loop on his lineage.

Now, some people worry that Jesus might have been illegitimate, but that's not the case either. Matthew tells us that Joseph took Mary 'as his wife and had no marital relations with her' until after Jesus was born (Matthew 1:29). For all intents and purposes, Joseph adopted Jesus who took his place in the long line of David's descendants and fulfilled all the prophecies about him.

Joseph doesn't have to say anything – his actions speak for him.

A gospel group called the Staple Singers once recorded a song called *Freedom Highway*. One of my favorite verses observes:

“So many people | living their lives perplexed,
wondering in their minds | what’s goin’ to happen next.”

Can anyone understand everything, especially the things that have actually happen to them? Do we *need* to know, or are we just anxious? Imagine how much effort we exert in trying to not seem perplexed. If the mother of God, the favored one, can be perplexed then maybe so can we.

Lillian Daniel wrote that Mary ‘understood enough to understand that she did not understand.’² That’s a little like Donald Rumsfeld talking about ‘unknown unknowns.’ Of *course*, Mary is perplexed. Of course, we are too. If not, we’d never learn anything.

Daniel writes that when we admit that we don’t have all the answers, that’s when we can hear God whispering to us. When we stop giving ourselves the answers we want to hear, when we let ourselves be perplexed, maybe that’s when we open ourselves up to be touched by God.³

Maybe God seeks out the perplexed. When we pray, “How can it be?”, God embraces us in our humanity. We live with two cats who often *look* as if they know everything, but they won’t even give you the time of day. God, on the other hand, who *does* know everything, is only too happy to share if we’ll only stop and listen.

The intricate details of all these writings are evident everywhere. In John’s Gospel, for example, Jesus calls himself ‘the bread of life’ (John 6:35), but only Luke tells us that Mary laid him in a manger, a feed trough (Luke 2:7). How did Mary become the favored one? Did Joseph, a descendant of David, just happen to come into her life? Somehow, these stories are all connected. We are meant to be perplexed by them.

Luke’s story is about a miracle, but the point is about God’s initiative and purpose in making it all happen, and in the commitment shown by God’s servants when it does.

Amen.

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¹ Robert P. Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 236-237.

² Lillian Daniel. “Borne in Perplexity: Luke 1:26-38.” *Journal for Preachers* 29 (1), 2005. 26-28.

³ *Ibid.*, 28.