

Sermon Proper 11 B
St. John's Episcopal Church
Anne Mansfield Minton

Our scriptures today pose a series of questions. Does God need a house? If so, who should build it? And what should the house look like? Now, for any of you who have been house-hunting or renovating or buying and selling properties, these are all questions with which you are familiar! However, we need to admit that when it comes to a house for God we have entered a different realm.

Last week we heard about David dancing before the ark of the covenant as it was brought to Jerusalem. After bringing the ark, the presence of God, into the city, the next thing that occurs to David is that he should build a temple to house the ark, to enclose and enshrine the presence of God. David thinks that this is a very good idea. He broaches it with the prophet Nathan who agrees and essentially says- although he says it in Hebrew- "go for it!" So far so good.

There is a slight problem, however. God does not agree. In the first place, God wonders why God needs a house. Pagan nations build temples for their gods and houses for their statues. But, the whole point is that the

God of the Hebrews is different. So, why do they need a temple for their God who is invisible and without images? Just to be like their pagan neighbors. They already said they wanted a king because everyone else had one, even though God objected. And, now they are moving into temple-building. So, God corrects the assumptions of David and Nathan. God has traveled with the people through the desert and up mountains and across rivers and into the heart of the city. The whole point is that God is mobile. Why build a house to close God in? And, by the way, among all the things that concern God, having a house is very low on the list!

Plus, God wants to know why David thinks he should build God a house. David is, to put it in the best possible light, morally flawed with certain ethical limitations! So, now he should be the one to build a temple?! God thinks not. One of David's offspring will build a house for God. And, indeed that's what happened. Solomon built the first temple which lasted until the Babylonians destroyed it 400 years later.

But, here comes the next twist in the story. When it comes to who will build what for whom we have an answer. God will actually build the house for God's people instead of God's people building a house for God. What we have here is a play on the word "house" which can also mean dynasty and household. David is being told that God will build a lineage for David.

And, as Christians we believe that Jesus was of the house and family of David. So, this promise of God extends across the centuries into our own day.

God wants to build a house. A house for God's people, the household of faith. Our God is always coming up with surprises and reversals. We think we have it all figured out and then God's marvelous spirit and sense of humor intervenes and we end up topsy-turvy. So, today we go from David building a house for God to God building a house for David. And in the letter to the Ephesians we hear about God going one better. Now the house that God will build for God's people will include those who are near and those who are far off. Will include Jews and Gentiles. Those who bear in their body the mark of circumcision and who observe the Law of Moses and those who do not. We may not think that including the near and the far in the same house of God is a big deal. But it was for them. Picture their pot-luck suppers with half the congregation observing the dietary laws of the Torah and the other half eating like omnivores! But, that's only the surface issue. Moving across the years, picture people who disagree on fundamental issues of theology and politics and the role of the Virgin Mary and the veneration of saints and on and on and on, all being in the same household

of faith. That's the kind of house which God intends to build for God's people.

And the thing that holds the household together is Christ the cornerstone. Christ who has made peace for us by reconciling us- different as we all are from one another- making peace among us and bringing us into the same household. It is into that household that we welcome three little girls this morning. All with names that mean grace in Hebrew- which is also what my name means! God's grace has drawn these three girls into the household of God. Into the house that God built.

The church and the local congregation are intended by God to be a laboratory for working on the values and the dreams of God. They are also intended as a witness to the world of the way God wants all people to live together. With respect and mutual forbearance, with genuine love, in the peace of Christ. Reconciled, healed, forgiven and redeemed. God's dream of what humanity could be- a new person in Christ.

We think of baptisms in many ways. Naming ceremonies. Initiation into the community. Major family celebrations. Joyous occasions for the parish. And all of these are true. But, at a deeper level when we baptize these girls in a few minutes and when we renew our own baptismal promises, we are doing something very radical. We are committing

ourselves and them to live in a new way. To live like God's dream for all humanity. With our divisions erased, our walls torn down, our hostilities at an end. Together in one body in Christ. Because, you see, God has built us a house. And invited us into the household. And promised us all we need and more for this life and the life to come. What a gracious and extravagant response to David's desire to build a cedar house for the ark of the covenant. No wonder God wanted to build the house. David's plans were far too constricted. God's were lavish and imaginative and infinitely creative. God has built us a house, my brothers and sisters. Let us rejoice to live in it and now let us welcome into it these three little girls. We've come a long way from God's promises to David but God is faithful to David and to us and God still wants to build us a house and welcome us in and so the story goes on...and on...and on.

Thanks be to God!