

The God Who Lives In a Tent

(LUKE 1:26-38 NRSV) *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign*

over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

King David was in a magnanimous mood. His military campaigns had established control of the promised land, and his charismatic leadership had united the twelve tribes politically. For the first time in memory life in Israel was peaceful. The economy was up; merchants and foreign ambassadors came from around the world tipped their hats to Israel!

As the lesson from Hebrew scripture opens, King David had just moved into a new house. And, since he was king, there hadn't been any of the "hassles" that usually go with building a house: painters showed up on time--even on the right day! carpet layers showed up with the right carpet. Even the weather cooperated. After all, he was king!

It was a beautiful house, paneled with cedar, draped with rich tapestries: tribute from exotic, faraway lands. So, as the king lounged in his new palace, he was feeling magnanimous! "I think I'll build God a house: a huge, grand, temple!

Maybe King David's feeling ashamed; after all, he has such a fine house of cedar, but the Almighty God of Israel has had to content himself with a mere tent.

So King David calls his press secretary and says, "Schedule a news conference for 8:00 o'clock tomorrow. I'm going to announce a Royal Building Program. I'm going to build God a huge, marvelous temple in Jerusalem. Surely, God will be flattered. After all, a capital city, ruled over by such a wise and powerful king ought to have a temple to show its close relationship with the greatest of all Gods. ("We're No. 1!")

But, King David is visited by another ambassador: a prophet of God, with a surprising message! We take up the text from Hebrew Scripture, II Samuel 7, vs. 4:

But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: ⁵Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? ⁶I 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. ⁷Wherever 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?" **8** 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; **9** 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. **10** And I will

*appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, **11** from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house.*

God reminds King David, "It was **I** who made **you**. **I** gave **you** a house. **I** gave **you** your throne. **I** gave **you** everything. Would you now presume to build a house for me?"

Maybe God realizes that King David's great show of royal generosity and piety is not all it seems to be. **This** God will **not be** the tamed house pet for the King of Israel. **This** God is bigger than that! **This** God comes and goes among us as he pleases, not at our bidding! **This** God will not be contained, not even by the King of Israel!

And in a wonderful way, this conversation between the Lord's prophet and King David is a prelude for today's gospel. We think like King David. Pick up this morning's paper, and you'll find very few stories and photos about people like you and me. You'll read about "**important**" people in "**important**" places like Washington, D.C., London, Beijing, Moscow, Pyongyang...

But in today's gospel we come face-to-face with a very different way of reading the news. We're not in Jerusalem; we're in Nazareth, out in Galilee—out in "the sticks"—one of the poorest cities in an already desperately poor little region of the world.

For four centuries God's people had been quivering with anticipation for the arrival of God into their world. Scholars had pored over the Scriptures, looking for clues. Astrologers scoured the heavens—reading the stars for some sign, some signal that God is coming.

At last, with a flutter of wings and a cloud of mystery, the heavenly messenger rushes earthward with a message directly from God. And where does the messenger go? To that little backwater town in Galilee—the most unlikely of places—to the most unlikely of people: an unmarried, poor, teenage girl.

And the angel's message is shocking. He addresses this poor, unmarried-but-pregnant girl—whom society then and now would regard as **dis**favored; and when he speaks to her, he begins: "Greetings, **Favored One**". Furthermore, the angel tells her, "The Lord is with you."

We know Jerusalem. We know Rome. But, where is Nazareth? [*I don't know; I think maybe it's out by Bigelow.*] We know Caesar. We've heard of Augustus. But who in the world is Mary; who's Joseph? a carpenter?

In a way, the thinking of King David is much closer to our understanding than is the story as Luke tells it. We expect to find God in the temple, in the capital city, among the learned, the powerful, the famous.

But that's not the way God does things. God's advent happens in a barn, in an alley behind a busy motel in Bethlehem, a tiny suburb just south of Jerusalem.

This God comes among people like us, in places like Arkansas—where we have the third highest poverty level in the United States and the tenth highest unemployment level. God comes to us, in places like Conway, twenty-five miles from the city with the third highest crime rate in the USA.

And, Luke implies that we shouldn't be too surprised by that. Angel Gabriel was sent to Nazareth, bringing glad tidings to ordinary Mary, and everyday Joseph.

How many times must we learn and re-learn this basic gospel truth, we who have been waiting so many Sundays for God to show up; we who celebrate—and sometimes endure—the season of Advent every year in anticipation of Emmanuel: God with Us; we who have sung the carols that pray for the advent of God in our lives. Sometimes, maybe God comes among us where we least expect, in ways so ordinary and every day, that we miss the whole wonder of it all, right here beside us.

When you leave the church today, go remembering the words of angel Gabriel to Mary: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

The Lord is with you, already: you, as you go about the next few days, running errands, taking the kids to ball practice or dance lessons, cooking, visiting friends; you, as you stand before your class at school; you, as you play with others on the playground; you, working at your computer in your office; you, waiting on customers at the store, doing homework, cleaning house, preparing a communion prayer.

The Lord is with you: not just up at the top, at the White House, at the Kremlin, with kings and presidents, but with you; not on Cloud Nine, but here, at your house, in Galilee, in Conway, Arkansas. The Lord is with you.

That's the way **this** God does things, favoring ordinary people like Mary and Joseph and you and me, in places like Nazareth and Conway. In **this** God—the one whose preference is to live in a tent instead of a temple—all our definitions of power, all our opinions about who is important, all our expectations for the way things work, get rearranged, refocused, changed.

If the heavenly ambassador showed up in Nazareth, there's just no telling **where** he might show up next. It might even be here.

"Greetings, favored ones! The Lord is with you!"

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