

A House To Live In

2 Samuel 7

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I

I love to tell stories about the quirky little apartment that Jackson and I first shared. For four years we lived in a two-story brick duplex in a historic neighborhood adjacent to downtown Des Moines. Our landlord lived next door to us, and she kept an office upstairs from our unit. We had the ground floor and the basement as well as a spacious front porch and a back deck. There was nothing glamorous at all about this apartment. The kitchen was dated and cramped. There was only one bathroom, and it was accessible only through the bedroom. There were bats living in the walls, which after dark you could hear faintly chirping, flapping, and squirming through the plaster. But the charm of the porch swing, the convenience of the laundry, and the glow of the wood burning fireplace made up for the little aggravations. The best thing about this apartment was the price - just \$645 per month, which Jackson and I split evenly - rent kept artificially low by an unselfish landlord who clearly valued her neighbors more than her property.

I share this story today because as I look back on that first humble apartment we shared I can't help but think - you know, we sort of took it for granted! It wasn't such a bad place to live. We felt pulled onward and upward by advancing careers and the desire to own a place ourselves. When I need to remind myself to practice gratitude for what we have and to be present to the circumstances we share, I still think about that first apartment and how we actually missed it when we moved to better places.

II

If we believe the books of Samuel, God is more content than we have been with an unpretentious dwelling place. After centuries of being carted about in an ark and a tent, King David had offered to build for God a glorious temple as a permanent home. In one of the prophet Nathan's famous diatribes, God refuses this extravagant gesture with withering sarcasm. "Is it you who would build for me a house to live in?" God asked. I brought Israel of Egypt. I plucked you out of obscurity in a pasture. I have given you victory over your enemies - and now, sure, you are going to build me a house! David had presented the construction of the temple as an offering to God and as an expression of gratitude. And at first Nathan was compliant with the king, quickly agreeing to move forward on the king's orders for the temple as a ministerial duty. "Whatever is in your heart," Nathan had said, "Do, for the Lord is with you." But close readers will notice that there is a double meaning to the word house in this text. David refers to the proposed temple as a "house" for God to dwell in. At the same time David wants a house for himself - not a house in the sense of a physical residence, but a house in the sense of his name. What David wants is a dynastic line. He doesn't just want to build a house for God; he envisions the House of David.

But a different vision is soon revealed to Nathan - God speaks to him a new word in the middle of the night. In many Bible stories, when the word of God comes at night you know you're really getting to the heart of the matter - it's God's truth without the usual daytime defenses. We can be betrayed by our dreams. When we give up control and let ourselves sleep, our minds sometimes take us immediately to the truth. So when God speaks to Nathan at night we are left with the sense that God has seen through the self-serving artifice of the public temple

campaign. God sends Nathan to ask the king - What's this really about? Is the temple God's desire, or yours?

Nathan's oracle thunders in judgment of this vanity project, and it also begins to foreshadow the real story of Samuel's second book: how David will be ruined by his pride, ambition, and lack of self-restraint. The temple is symbolic of David's undoing. While he prized this accomplishment over so many others, his preoccupations with personal and political distractions will leave the temple so delayed that its fulfillment awaits David's son and successor, Solomon. Nathan's oracle belabors this point, which has the double impact of chastening the self-important king and praising the power of God. God will build God's own temple when God is good and ready. This story is not about a king's power to glorify God, but about God's glory that shakes the foundations of the throne.

III

I think of these as spiritual questions. Our spirituality has to do with the alignment of our inner lives with our outer lives. Or another way of putting that is to speak of the alignment of our hearts with God's heart. What David wants is not what God wants. David will never grow to understand God's contentment. God's reaction to David's proposal is simple and direct. "I never asked for this," God says. For years you and your predecessors have carried me about with you in an ark and a tent. "When did I ever speak a word to any of the tribal chiefs, saying, "Why did you not build me a cedarwood house to live in?" That's an interesting way for me to think about the unfolding of my own life. When have I mistaken my desire as God's desire? We can be very clever in our self-deceptions, convincing ourselves that things we want are the very things that God wants for us. Or to put it another way - we have to be careful not to speak for God. If we talk about what God wants with too much conviction and certainty, we risk leaving God in the position of arguing back with us - "But wait, I never said that," God says. If we're talking about what God wants we've got to be very careful not to put words in God's mouth.