

Surprised by the Sacred
Proper 11B, 2 Samuel 7.1-14a
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After Ardelle and I returned from the farmer's market yesterday morning I took a Bible, a few books and my laptop to the shed in the backyard to begin typing this sermon. I much prefer to be polishing a sermon rather than starting one on a Saturday morning, but some weeks are like that.

I built the shed a few years ago to house the lawnmower and bicycles and various tools that I didn't want to haul up from the basement every time they were needed. But while our daughter was riding out the early months of the pandemic at home with us, we made other arrangements for the stuff and turned the shed into a little office/guest room of sorts. Kate was the chief decorator.

The walls and tin roof remained uninsulated. A piece of plywood laid across the rafter ties holds her old screen-printing screens and a few books. There's a Mavis Staples concert poster tacked up next to a window made of four glass blocks left in the yard by the previous owners of our house. Kate's frighteningly convincing newspaper collage of Audrey Hepburn was glaring into my back as I typed this, and a rectangle of slate on which my grandmother painted a little white church house with birches on a riverbank in the foreground is leaned against the wall in front of me. It's a surprisingly pleasant room.

There were actually plenty of other places in the house to type. But, as I said, it was Saturday morning and I had a sermon to come up with posthaste. I needed a space where I might be surprised by a thought I hadn't quite had before. Or at least a space I might describe for you and maybe even, by the time I finished, find myself 300 words into the sermon I'd sat down in that shed to write.

I started typing yesterday, but I'd been thinking for much of the week on that wonderful exchange we just heard from 2nd Samuel between David, the prophet Nathan, and Yahweh. It's a conversation, at least in part, about what makes places holy, which I'm coming to believe is at least one part surprise.

King David, we read, has just settled into his house. He's settled in right after last week's reading, in which he danced ecstatically (and apparently somewhat scantily clad) before the Ark of the Covenant as it made its way back into Jerusalem after having been lost in battle with the Philistines. That dancing unsettled David's wife Michal, who was embarrassed that her husband—the king, no less—was... well, here are her words: "uncovering himself...before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!"

David says, "Well, I'm sorry, but I was dancing before God, and you have no idea how contemptible I plan to become before I'm through." That's not a direct quote, but he did use the word "contemptible," which will definitely be an appropriate adjective for David as his story unfolds. Not for his dancing so much as for a tendency toward infidelity, betrayal, and murder and such. But I digress.

David broke into that ecstatic, cringeworthy dance because an ancient, holy object had made its way back into the city. And when he settled back into his own house of cedar, he wondered aloud to Nathan if it was right that the ark of God was housed in a tent.

If you have an annotated Bible, there's a good chance you'll find a floorplan of the tabernacle and its courts if you turn back to Exodus 25. I recommend it. This was the tent to which David refers, and it and its furnishings are all described in great detail. The tent is 100 cubits by 50 (a cubit being about a foot and a half). There's an altar built of acacia wood and a bronze basin inside the entrance. Further in is the tabernacle that holds a lamp and a table and a small altar for incense, all of which are overlaid with pure gold and arranged in front of a curtain that hides the Ark of the Covenant.

The ark held the stone tablets of the Law. It, too, was made of acacia wood and overlaid with gold. Golden rods slipped through four gold rings so an exiled people could carry the ark with them as they moved. And atop it was something called the mercy seat. Two cherubim, made of hammered gold, faced each other on either side. And the seat is the empty chair of Yahweh. The place where the God of mercy would be if God were somewhere in particular.

I thought it might be helpful to at least have a sense of what the "tent" was to which David alluded in his conversation with Nathan. It wasn't exactly a faded canvas model from the Army Surplus store. Everything about it suggested an odd combination of sacredness and portability. Now David was in Jerusalem, hopefully to establish an everlasting kingdom (as all kings hope). "So," he says, "how about we make a proper and permanent house for God?"

Now, sometimes prophets tell kings they've lost touch with reality. But Nathan said David should carry through with his plan. But God came to Nathan that night and said, "Go tell David I never asked for a house of cedar. Tell him that what I want is to make a house *from* him. A household of the children of the shepherd boy I chose to be king."

Now, this might seem like the time to say the thing people always say, especially when we're stuck at home during pandemics: "The Church isn't the building. It's the people." But the story doesn't turn away from all these wild and splendid particulars. Remember, the Ark of the Covenant is still going to inhabit the not so shabby digs described above until David's son Solomon builds a temple in Jerusalem. What God seems to be telling David is not to forget what holy things and holy places are for.

The great scholar of religion, Mircea Eliade, wrote a book titled *The Sacred and the Profane*. And, in it, he insisted that religion begins with a moment in which the sacred, or God, breaks through into human experience. "Hierophany" is the term he uses. That experience can't be adequately put into language, nor can the God who has broken in upon us. But what humans consistently do after such an encounter, is not to say, "Wow. God is everywhere!" What humans do in response to sacred encounter is...well, they take off their shoes because the ground they're standing on suddenly feels different from other ground. They stack up stones to mark this particular place. Maybe paint the front doors red. After an encounter with the holy, Eliade said humans no longer see all the space around them as homogenous. Some places and moments are different. Charged with a presence, or were once charged with a presence, that sets them apart. And acknowledging the world as so is one ancient way we orient ourselves within it.

Now, idolatry is believing the made thing or the place itself is the god. It's believing that the whole of the sacred is contained in the material object. The Hebrew Scriptures are the story of a struggle to let go of idolatry and come to trust the God who cannot be contained in a tent or even described with a name. But a God who is still encountered in strange and surprising ways among their neighbors, in their cities, among ornate furnishings for a tabernacle or maybe at a bush that burns but is not consumed. Which means those neighbors and furnishings and burning bushes can be as much a kind of language with which we can reach toward God as are the words of scriptures and creeds. Why else would you carry stone tablets in a little golden house through the

wilderness for all those years? In fact, maybe, if not the opposite, at least an antidote to idolatry is a capacity for divine surprise. An openness to the next place God might surprise us.

I hesitate to reduce these stories to a clear and practical lesson for our lives, even if you have every right to expect this from a sermon. The wild details of the Bible do a kind of irreducible work on us. Like the quirky furnishings for a garden shed, or a church, or a city block that bring them and us to life. Furnishings for a world that doesn't seem so homogeneous and so stuck, but, rather, a place still ripe for surprise and strangeness. Ripe for the holy.

But I need to believe in such a world pretty badly right now. I need to get a little less stuck in my thinking, and opened a little more to the possibility of being surprised by God. And I think I need people, places, and things that will help me do that. Don't you?

It might seem like what would open us best to surprise would need to be strange and unfamiliar, but it doesn't. Our worship tradition, our hymns and organ pipes and tower bells, our chalices and vestments and wobbly brass crosses are more like idols if they only settle us reassuringly into the stability of the past. They're meant to be objects carried through the wilderness of so many centuries to startle us into a present hope that God can make something new, not only of us, but of our world. They are relics and reminders from lives and times in which God has done just that.

Surprise set David to dancing one day in the streets before God's fancy, ancient, empty chair. And that surprise is what God kept alive a day later by telling the ecstatic king not to build a house, but to see the house of God as all those generations of people yet to come.

So, it could be that it's time to put our bodies to work again at worship after so many months apart. Coming together and continuing that procession into Jerusalem with sacred and beautiful things, each dedicated to God, and each made to reorient our minds and bodies to God. Or it may be that we need to let the gilded things loosen their grip on our imaginations for a bit and consider the people in the years to come and imagine what it means to see them as the place where God truly dwells.

More than likely, it will always be some mixture of the two, and we'll always need other Christians to help us keep our liturgies and our lives attentive and open to where God is moving among us. To who God is calling us to be. To the ways in which our life together can keep us from settling or despairing that the way things are is just the way things have to be, and giving those lives over to the God who is eternally capable of resurrection-scale surprise.