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2 Samuel 7:1-14a

Building Projects

David knew about getting ahead—getting ahead being the great goal and accomplishment of life. You want to get ahead of the count in baseball: as the batter you want balls in your favor, so you get a pitch to hit into the stands. You want to get ahead of the curve outside of the ballpark as well: to get ahead of trends before they are trends: buy those shares before the company goes public, purchase that property before the neighborhood gets hot. You want building projects to get ahead of schedule. Yeah, right. What building project is ever completed ahead of schedule? In the real world we live with undone bathrooms for a very long time,

All these ways one wants to get ahead are quite modern—as is plumbing, so nice to have toilets—but the urge to get ahead isn't. David of the Old Testament, the guy we've been hearing about a lot in the Bible readings this summer, David knew all about getting ahead. David lived about 1000 BC. That's a long time ago, way before indoor plumbing, way before you could just flush "stuff" away. David lived a long time ago, but he was a forward looking guy. He was very good at getting ahead, at taking steps to get where he would be next, even getting out there and meeting it. When a giant threatened, David went ahead and fought him. When David was on the run from murderous King Saul, when it was all David could do just to stay alive, he went ahead and ate holy bread, the bread of the Presence (Jesus will later use that episode this as a positive example in the gospels). And when he finally become king, and then became bored, David went ahead and took another man's wife. That story is still ahead of us, but it fits this pattern, this aspect of David's personality: he was a go-getter. And as that story also shows, doing what you can to make things happen, get what you want, is not always for the good. I think we all get that.

Why, though, we might still ask, why this story today? It's not about trying to get something not good, so why didn't David get the go ahead? Why couldn't David build a house for God? What's wrong with that? David, no doubt, is ready to bring to this venture his capacity for accomplishment, all his energy and confidence, all his many gifts, which we know, come from God. And, go getter though he is, David even asks permission first, of the priest, Nathan, and, at first, David does get sacred clearance, which makes sense, how could there be anything wrong with wanting or doing this? But God says "No." Which seems strange. God doesn't want David to make a place where people can worship? Half a millennium before David, as far back as Moses, God has emphasized how important it is for people to worship. God has commandments about it, and not just one, reams of descriptions of how to do so. Now David wants to make a place where people can do that. Why doesn't God want David to make a place for people to do what God wants them to do?

God's no is strange. In this story, God's no sounds not just strange, but petulant, that's what I think when I first read God's response. Look at the reasons God gives for not wanting David to build a temple. The first reason God gives is, "I didn't ask for it." Which, I'm sorry, sounds rather petty. Maybe even worse, as God continues speaking, it sounds like God actually does like the idea, but wants to be the one to have it. It's as if God is saying to David, "It's not okay if you build me a house, but, now that I think of it, I am going to have your son do so." This is what God is like? Why would anyone want to worship that?

To work though this, some interpreters find fault with David. As we have already established and as will be proven, in particular next week, there are reasons to find fault with David. In this story today, some note that David does seem rather impressed with himself, now

that that he is living in a house of cedar—how fresh and invigorating that particular building material is! Surrounded by all that fragrant wood you can barely smell the outhouse. Perhaps, David thinks, now that things are going so swimmingly in the kingdom and not to mention for David himself, perhaps David thinks God, too, ought to have some more upscale digs, not just that flimsy tent. It reflects poorly on God, when you think of it. And maybe, David thinks, when a grander structure is completed, there could be a little plaque on it somewhere, to mention who built it, for God. David would be eager to do that. So it is some say David has an edifice complex.

There may be something to that—especially if we recognize ourselves in that; if we acknowledge how much projection plays into that interpretation, that David had an edifice complex. It takes one to know one. Ultimately, though, I think that's too simplistic a read: it makes David a flat character, when he is anything but, and it suggests that God is against structures, or interior design, which God is not. This is obvious if you read the book of Leviticus, with its meticulous, lavish, lovingly specific guidelines for God's traveling holy habitation. And there's yet more luscious and detailed specifications in I Kings, specifications for the Temple, which does get built by David's son with God's approval. It cannot be denied that significant amounts of Biblical space are allotted to the description of and care for structures. I remind myself of this, when our church's boiler explodes; I remind myself that caring for structures has theological import.

God is not against buildings. But God is less interested in building projects than the people in them. That's what they are for, these holy houses, they're not for God—God doesn't need a house—they're for the people in them. And perhaps even more importantly, they're for the people outside of them. Being in a church, hearing the stories and scripts of faith, reminds us that as a church we are always looking outside these walls. We look outside because, as the reading from Ephesians says, that's where we once were: we were outsiders, aliens, “strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” That's where we were, and then Christ brought us near to God. Christ broke down the dividing walls that separated us, and built a new structure, with “himself as the cornerstone.” “In him the whole structure is joined together.” Not only that, Ephesians, says “you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” That's God's building project: us, each and every one of us and all of us together. God's building project is that we be the holy temple, that we be dwelling places for the Lord.

I do not blame David for wanting to do something, but perhaps that is me, projecting onto David. I, too, can be a go-getter. I too, want things to happen, good things, I want to be a part of making them happen, and when they do not, I do not understand why. I do not understand God's no. Is it God's no? I do not know. I do know that God does not wish bad things upon us. I do know that most attempts at explaining life's no's either demonize, or minimize, God. And that is not who God is. God's will is not suffering, or pain; and God is always bigger than we can know. God is far vaster our conceptions, and God will not be confined by them. God has always been on the move, since the day God brought Israel from Egypt and well before then, since the beginning of time, God has been moving, moving over the waters at creation, moving into a future for which we have no blueprint, only a promise, a promise that is life, and love, and hope; the promise that one day every tear shall be wiped away, and suffering shall be no more, for the home of God is among mortals.

God is way ahead of us, as God was way ahead of David. David wanted to build a house, God is building an everlasting kingdom.