
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Wherever You Are

A Sermon by

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Scripture: 2 Samuel 7:1-14a

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In the first seven years of our marriage, Ted and I moved no less than ten times. The first move was on our wedding day, when my father-in-law-to-be sold the house we were going to live in and the new owners had to move in that day! The move was to an apartment we could rent for three months before we left for St. Louis for Ted to go to seminary, an apartment so filthy I would not let my future mother-in-law in it until it was cleaned and disinfected. The third move was to a seminary basement apartment. Fourth to a first floor seminary apartment. Fifth to Ted's first church and an apartment. Sixth, I moved from Missouri to Boston, Massachusetts, for seminary. Seventh, back in Missouri, we moved from an apartment to the parsonage next to the church. It had a living room/dining room so large we nicknamed it the bowling alley. Eighth, we moved to our first co-pastorate in New York where we asked the Search Committee to rent an apartment for us and they called us and said they had given us a raise. They would not live in the apartments that could be afforded on our salary. Ninth, a small men's home had a caretaker's apartment available for free if we would be on call nights and weekends. "Apartment" would be a generous word; two small rooms, really, and our first daughter was born at that time. In those days you brought her home in a car seat and a box, sort of like putting her in a dresser drawer. A house came open in a very nice neighborhood and we were sure we could not afford the neighborhood, but it turned out the house had not been remodeled in 40 years, just in our price range. What do they call that? Fixer upper? Starter home for persons on a budget? Money pit? That was our tenth move in seven years. We have been blessed with houses ever since, structures we made into homes, dwelling places that offered us safety and security, a base from which we could live the life to which we were called.

Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent."

How many times had King David moved,
from shepherd boy to luxury homeowner,
from nomad, agrarian, living off the land, danger around every corner,
to cedar walls, rare, imported, hand carved, opulent,
to ensconced, fortified, landed, a monarchy, an institution, settled, at the height of its glory.

The piece of the Book that we heard today is like picking up a story and opening it up to about the middle third.

If the Old Testament is the story of a people, God's people, the first third is about the birth, the creation, their coming together as a people, and then their downfall, becoming slaves in Egypt. The first third might be called The Exodus, (would make a great movie, wouldn't it, starring Johnny Depp, maybe?)

"Once you were no people, now you are God's people."

"My ancestors were wandering Arameans, strangers in a foreign land. God brought us up out our slavery into a land overflowing with milk and honey."

The first third of the story is living in ten different places in seven years. The first third of the story is being a new church start, having no people, no building, no governance, no resources. Only a vision: we want a church here. Fifty-five years ago on the very north edge of a growing Phoenix. New churches I worked with: we want an Open and Affirming church here, a place where everyone

will be welcome: in Oklahoma City, in Dallas, in North Carolina, in Hoover, Alabama, in some of the most conservatively theological environments. “We want to build a house for God here.” There’s nothing more exciting than a new church start that works, where the vision catches fire, where people drive from miles around and say, “I never thought I would find a church like this.”

The second third of the story is today’s story. The new church start has now bought land and built a building. The shepherd boy has risen to being king. The foreigners, the outcasts, the strangers are now the ‘insiders’, the ones in power. They now have the constitution and bylaws down pat; they wrote them. They are the ones who bought the furniture: and you want to move it? The ones on the inside look at those people coming to their doors now, and they can open those doors, or not. They can welcome in, or not. They can nurture, or not.

For the monarchy, there is always the danger that the monarchy will fall. It did for King David. He had all the toys, all the powers, all the prophets and sages and advisors and priests. He had God all figured out, the God he had carried in a box, an ark, a tabernacle under a tent. “Doesn’t God deserve better than that?” cries David. “I’ll build God a house, a temple, the most glorious dwelling place ever!”

The middle third of the story is that the monarchy falls. The dreams come crashing down. Other hot shot kings come trampling in with their dreams of greatness and power. Israel collapses; the people are carried off into exile. The Temple, which did get built but not by David, is in ruins. The economy of Israel collapses. Foreclosures are up. Unemployment is the highest it has been in decades. People are lucky to be working at all. Health care and Social Security are distant memories for most. Only the few and the privileged have the safety net from the new Monarch. Even the religious authorities draw back into fear and wonder if this really is a good time to spend so much money. “Maybe we should play it safe for awhile? Let’s not give it all away. Let’s make sure we have enough for ourselves first.”

Ten days ago I did this little interview with Channel 3 about Church of the Beatitudes being a Heat Relief station for the city of Phoenix. We are one of many around the valley but the news crew could not find anyone else who would speak about the program. The segment was about 20 seconds long, if that, showed our church, our office team stacking cases of water, and my saying, “As the temperature gets hotter and hotter, this is an easy way for us to reach out into the community and touch people’s lives, those who need it the most.” Something like that. They cut all my really profound lines. It aired Thursday and Saturday. By Monday morning, people were coming in with cases of water and financial donations. By Friday last week, I think we lost count, over 50 cases of water had come in by the kindness of strangers. “Can we have your name so we can thank you?” “Nope, just want to help people. Glad you are doing this.”

It makes me think: we are so lucky to be that oasis of help and compassion.

It makes me think: why isn’t every church, every temple, every mosque a similar oasis?

It makes me think: what if we were on Channel 3, 5, 12, 15, every week, saying here we collect bikes for the homeless, backpacks and school supplies for children in need, medical supplies for Nicaragua, Habitat Build for working poor families.

What if people who drive and walk and ride the bus past our oasis knew what it is that we do in here?

To the people who drive and walk and ride the bus past us every day, we are the monarchy, distant and irrelevant to their lives. We are the religious authorities and they feel like dummies, like outsiders, unable, unworthy to walk in, be a part, rest, renew, and join in. People walk, drive, ride the bus past our Church doors each and every day carrying human hurts and hopes. People who still have not stepped across our threshold are carrying loneliness, divorce, abuse, addictions, cancer, mental illness, job losses, fear. People who do not know what we do in here go past us carrying joys of family, generous spirits, a longing for meaning and purpose and hope, incredible gifts. Their hurts and hopes are our hurts and hopes. By the grace of God, we have found this to be a place of rest and joy for our souls.

What better time for us to reach out, to be that 'aroma of Christ', the compassionate, loving people, than in times exactly like these?

The Hebrew word for house occurs seven times in this passage. It is the kind of word that can mean palace, temple, or it can mean dynasty.

God may be less interested in what kind of temple we build for God, because don't we know that God cannot be contained in any location. God may be less interested in what we have, and more interested in what we have given away. Mother Theresa once said, "It is not how much we do, but how much love we put into the doing. It is not how much we give, but how much love we put into the giving." Amen.