

## **God's Ways Are Not Our Ways**

Advent 4 Year B: Canticle 15; 2 Samuel 7:7-16; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Lets face it. We often think we know what God should do or want. In this regard, King David was quick to decide, on his own, that God needed a permanent place of residence. I wonder: was David's motivated to build a house for God because of David's devotion to God? Or was David acting to benefit himself: centralizing worship in what was being promoted as the City of David; the adoration of the people troubled about having a God without a fixed and glorious temple; or, knowing the ways of the rich and powerful, a big tax deduction?

But God quickly responded: David you are not the one to build me a temple. Have I ever asked anyone to do that? Instead I have been traveling with my people in a tent. I am going to provide for my people Israel a place where they can live in safety. Your dynasty and kingdom will be secure for ever.

This story from 2 Samuel was not written during the reign of David, but rather, 400 years or so later during the Babylonian exile. The exile was time Israel had no king or temple or country or hope. The Children of Israel were no doubt asking questions like, is the God of the Exodus the God of a people in exile? Can we even worship in exile with the City of David and the temple destroyed?

Perhaps our times feel like a time of exile. When we dare to, don't we question where God is, and why God does not come to us for advice? We worry, how long will worship of God continue in a society that is becoming increasingly secular, a society where sporting events for children and sporting events as entertainment for adults, have overtaken what used to be the day of worship, a culture where the support of the State for Christianity is declining. This angst often surfaces at Christmas, when the church's long effort to make Christmas, which was not celebrated in any form by the Church for the first 450 years after Christ's death, into a religious holiday, seems to be less and less effective.

This Christmas we are faced with an even more threatening challenge: the protests arising out of the shooting of three black men, ranging from age 12 to middle age, by police officers, each in a settling that would seem to have presented a minimal threat. These protests raise in a new way a concern that we have made little progress in making equal rights a reality for all minorities. This same question is raised in the context of our draconian drug laws. Studies show that black and whites use drugs in equal amounts. Yet blacks who make up about 13% of the population, make up 31% of the drug arrests, and blacks make up more than 40% of Americans incarcerated on drug charges. As one commentator stated, "Other than slavery and Jim Crow laws, no other social policy has served to devalue Black lives more that America's drug war."

And speaking more broadly, we read news accounts of studies that show that

richest 5% have gotten much richer and the other 95% have gotten much poorer, that the wealth our black citizens has dropped while that of whites has gone up, and that the economic recovery has benefited whites but not blacks.

Listen again to what God says to David: my promise to you, my covenant, will last forever. My promise, unlike the conditional covenant of Sinai where obedience will be rewarded and disobedience punished, my promise to David has no conditions.

How reassuring those words must have been to the Children of Israel, living in exile.

Feelings of exile force us, like the Children of Israel, to face the existential threat that God is absent. But God's answer to David that God does not live in a house, that God's presence cannot be contained, opens up for us the possibility of considering that God is still here even though the world does not fit our view of what God's world should be. Can we still imagine that God's grace will never be extinguished, that there will always be hope?

The time of Jesus' conception and birth, was a time that was perhaps worse than the exile for the Children of Israel. Their land occupied by cruel foreign power that were extorting the life out of the community; the dynasty of David had been defunct for more than 800 years; there were great divisions in the Jewish religious community. Surely for the Jews of Jesus time, the words of God to David, your name will be great, you will be the greatest people on earth, you will live undisturbed, cruel people will no longer trouble you, your dynasty will be secure forever, must have sounded very hollow.

And yet at that dark time, and on this weekend of the final frenzy before Christmas, we hear the words of Mary:

***My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; \*  
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.  
From this day all generations will call me blessed: \*  
the Almighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his Name.  
He has mercy on those who fear him \*  
in every generation.  
He has shown the strength of his arm, \*  
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.  
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, \*  
and has lifted up the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things, \*  
and the rich he has sent away empty.  
He has come to the help of his servant Israel, \****

***for he has remembered his promise of mercy,  
The promise he made to our fathers, \*  
to Abraham and his children for ever.***

Comforting words. But, if we listen closely, also troubling words. Are we ready for the mighty to be cast down while the lowly are lifted up; for the hungry to be filled with good things while the rich are sent away empty? And, as if all these things have already happened, Mary says God has shown, has scattered, has cast down, has lifted up, has filled, has sent away empty, has remembered past promises of mercy. Did we notice? Can we think of when these things have happened?

Mary's words were written in Greek, and Greek tenses are much more complex and precise than verb tenses in English. And even 2000 years later we still don't fully understand the subtleties of the aorist tense Mary used. But read in their context, perhaps Mary is saying that because these things have happened, they will continue to happen. Thus she is both remembering and prophesying with the same words. God's words to David have the same sense. The Israelites had fled Egypt and settled in the promised land. Yet God speaks in the future tense: I will select a place where my people can live in safety as their own place.

And isn't this what we say about the kingdom of God about which Jesus taught in his ministry: God's kingdom has already come and God's kingdom will come.

As we move into Christmas week, lets stop beating ourselves up about how we have fallen into the commercialization of Christmas, or that we have not done enough to prepare. Let's use our memories and imagination to envision what great things God has done and will do. An then lets allow the Holy Spirit prepare us to take up the work God has set before us, to work for God's kingdom as we love our neighbor as ourselves.

Amen.

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