

## *The House of the Lord*

By Anthony Pagliarini, PhD

December 20 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

Readings: 2 Samuel 7.1-5; 8-12; 14; 16; Romans 16.25-27; Luke 1.26-38

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### Building a House for the Lord

David is firmly established in Jerusalem. The Lord “had given him rest from his enemies on every side” (at least for now), and he enjoyed the gift of the palace given him by the King of Tyre. It is then, “when King David was settled in his palace” (2 Sam 7.1), that David takes note of the disparity between his dwelling and God’s. “Here I am living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God [and, therefore, the presence of God] dwells in a tent” (2 Sam 7.2).

In saying as much, David expresses his intention to build a house for the Lord. It is a good sentiment, and the prophet Nathan offers his approval: “Go, do whatever you have in mind, for the Lord is with you” (2 Sam 7.3). Unfortunately, there is more to right action than good intention. While David has rightly seen the disparity between his dwelling and God’s, the solution will not be what he proposes. The scene reminds one of St. Peter’s fumbling suggestion at the Transfiguration: “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (Matt 17.4). Like David, Peter grasps the gravity of the situation, but his suggestion is not what God has in mind to achieve.

No tents were put up that day on Mt. Tabor, and neither would David be allowed to build in the days of his reign. That same night “the word of the Lord came to Nathan and said: ‘Go and tell my servant David, “Thus says the Lord: Should you build me a house to dwell in?”’” (2 Sam 7.4-5). The question, of course, is rhetorical. Even though David would do much to set in motion the building and operation of the Temple (see 1 Chr 28-29), the Temple is not his to build.

Why, though, should this be the case? The Lord desires such a house, and David’s son Solomon will go on to build it for him. In the judgment of his heir, ongoing conflicts during David’s reign prevent him from establishing the Temple. “You know,” says Solomon, “that my father David could not build a house for the name of the Lord his God because of the warfare with which his enemies surrounded him, until the Lord put them under the soles of his feet. But now the Lord my God has given me rest on every side; there is neither adversary nor misfortune” (1 Kgs 5.3-4).

A more essential reason is suggested in the Lord’s question to David: “Should you build me a house to dwell in?” (2 Sam 7.5). The initiative for building the Temple must originate with the Lord and not with David, no matter the beauty of his sentiment. The Lord twice emphasizes that in all the years since Israel left Egypt he has never “dwelt in a house” (2 Sam 7.6) and he has not requested of them “a house of cedar” (2 Sam 7.7). He desires, rather, to dwell in a tabernacle of his own designing.

We see this truth in the generation of the Exodus. It is the Lord who commands Moses to receive offerings from the Israelites and who instructs him that “They are to make a sanctuary for me, that I may dwell in their midst” (Exod 25.8). What is more, the specifics of this construction find their origin in God. The Tabernacle in the wilderness will itself be a copy of the heavenly original. And so the Lord goes on to say, “According to all that I show you regarding the pattern

of the tabernacle and the pattern of its furnishings, so you are to make it" (Exod 25.9). And the head craftsman, a certain Bezalel, will himself be guided by the divine hand. "I have filled him with a divine spirit of skill and understanding and knowledge in every craft" (Exod 31.3).

The same emphasis on divine origin is present in Ezekiel's final vision. As he languishes in the Babylonian exile, the prophet is shown a temple whose details are in some sense determinative for the generations who will return to the Land. His task is to "describe the temple to the house of Israel" (Ezek 43.10). Here as well, the shape and substance of Israel's worship is not determined by men's imagining but by what is revealed from on high.

With this in mind we might expect the Lord to tell David, "It is not you who will build me a house. Rather, it is I who take charge of the building!" It is true that God goes on to mention "your offspring after you," namely Solomon, "who shall build a house for my name" (2 Sam 7.12, 13). The first and most meaningful contrast, however, is not between the temple which David would build and the temple which the Lord will build. It is rather the contrast of house and "house," the contrast of the temple which David would build and the "house," or offspring, which God will establish for David. "The Lord also reveals to you that he will establish [make] a house for you. [. . .] Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever" (2 Sam 7.11, 16).

## The Son of David and God's Dwelling

This is a strange juxtaposition. The wordplay on "house" is easy to see; the actual connection between the two ideas is not. They seem, in fact, wholly unrelated (much as in a phrase like this: "Is it you who will give me a hound dog? No. Rather, I will hound you.") What does God's promise to give David a dynasty have to do with David's intention to build God a temple? How is one a corrective to the other?

The Gospel of John brings an answer into focus. After the Lord overturns tables in the Temple, his fellow Jews say to him, "'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking about the temple of his body" (Jn 2.18-21). As the site of God's dwelling in Israel and as the place of definitive sacrifice, Jesus himself is the Temple of Israel. It is not the building on Zion; it is Jesus himself.

And who is Jesus but the "Son of David" (Matt 1.1 *et al.*)?

We said earlier that one might expect the Lord to tell David, "It is not you who will build me a house. Rather, it is I who take charge of the building!" And this is in a way what he says. The promise that a son will sit on David's throne forever is itself the promise of the perfect future Temple. Jesus, the "Son of David," is himself the Temple (John 2.21). The one of whom the Tabernacle and the Temple were approximations has now become "flesh and pitched his tabernacle [*skanos*] among us" (John 1.14).

St. Matthew conveys the same truth. Solomon, the son of David, builds the first Temple in Israel. Jesus, "the son David," speaking of himself, announces that "something greater than Solomon is here" (Matt 12.42). It is the new Son of David who builds the new Temple. "I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church" (Matt 16.18). And as St. Paul teaches us, this Church is nothing other than "the body of Christ" (1 Cor 12.27; also see John 2.21). Once again, we see Jesus as the new and perfect Temple of God's people.

There is more. If God's promise to David concerns his eventual "building" of the body of Jesus, the new Temple, then God's promise also concerns kingship. After all, the contrast which sets the passage from 2 Samuel in motion is the discrepancy between the dwelling of king David and the dwelling of the "the Lord, Israel's king" (Isa 44.6; see 1 Sam 8.6-7). Heard in this way, God's reply to David—"The Lord will make a house for you" (2 Sam 7.11)—again seems difficult to grasp. David proposes a dwelling; God responds with the promise of an offspring on the throne.

The prophet Ezekiel offers some clarity. In an oracle given to the prophet, God condemns the current shepherds of Israel. "Look! I am coming against these shepherds. I will take my sheep out of their hand and put a stop to their shepherding my flock" (Ezek 34.10). The Lord will act in their place. "I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest—oracle of the Lord God. The lost I will search out, the strays I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, and the sick I will heal" (Ezek 34.15-16). And yet, further along in the same passage, the role of shepherd is said to belong to David, by which it means an heir of the king. "I will appoint one shepherd over them to pasture them, my servant David; he shall pasture them and be their shepherd. I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David will be prince in their midst. I, the Lord, have spoken" (Ezek 34.23-24).

In the Gospel reading from Luke, this tension between God as shepherd and David as shepherd is resolved. In his announcement to the Blessed Virgin, the angel Gabriel refers to the child as both son of God and son of David. "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father" (Luke 1.31-32). The one shepherd over Israel is both God and the son of David, for the Lord himself has become the son of David. Nothing indeed is impossible for God (see Luke 1.37).

We see, therefore, that God's reply to David is in fact a fitting one. God reveals to David where it is he will dwell: not in "a house of cedar" such as David might build, but in the "house" which God himself will build, namely, the offspring of David, the Lord Jesus. In the covenant to David in 2 Samuel 7, God prophesies in one and the same word the future Temple of Israel and the future king: "Christ . . . the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages but now manifested through the prophetic writings" (Rom 16.25-26).

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### ***For Further Reading***

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, [## 484-511](#)
- *Thomas Aquinas, S.T.*, [q. 31, a. 3](#)
- *Stephen C. Smith*, [\*The House of the Lord: A Catholic Biblical Theology of God's Temple Presence in the Old and New Testaments\*](#)

### ***In Short . . .***

- *There is more to right action than good intention. One must often discern whether an action is in accord with the will of God.*
- *The initiative to build the Temple had to come from God, not David. Thus, the Temple has a divine, not a human, origin.*
- *God's Temple—the House of the Lord—is connected to the Davidic line—the House of David.*
- *It is in the person of Jesus that the House of the Lord and the House of David are truly one. The one shepherd over Israel is both God and the son of David.*
- *God reveals to David where it is he will dwell: not in “a house of cedar” such as David might build, but in the “house” which God himself will build, namely, the offspring of David, the Lord Jesus.*