

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
September 15, 2019

The House That God Has Built

2 Samuel 7:1-17

The Rogers Mansion is a beautiful Victorian-era home situated in Southampton, New York. Prior to 1880, it had been in the Rogers family for eight generations. The most prominent family member was Captain Albert Rogers, who became rich in the flourishing whaling industry. In 1899, it was purchased by a New York City attorney who added to the structure in the Colonial Revival style.

As you can imagine, the Rogers Mansion has many impressive features. Greek columns on the porch, a splendid parlor with whaling souvenirs, an extensive toy collection, a lovely music room with French doors and a grand piano. All this and much more, situated on beautifully manicured grounds.

About a year ago, a local business called Tiny Hamptons held an event on the grounds of the Rogers Mansion. Tiny Hamptons builds tiny houses. You may have seen these types of homes. They've become increasingly popular. There's now even such a thing as the tiny house movement. For the event, Tiny Hamptons parked one of their 350-square-foot-houses on the Rogers property and invited prospective buyers to check it out. As the company said in a press release, "This home on wheels has everything from a space for a queen-sized bed to an outdoor shower and fireplace." This, in contrast to a 20-room mansion from the Gilded Age. No wonder one local news outlet described the event as "Tiny House vs. Mansion."¹

The opening of today's Scripture passage from 2 Samuel sounds like a case of Tiny House vs. Mansion. King David is settled in his "house," a palace in the capital city Jerusalem. The kingdom is at peace and secure. God, on the other hand, is living in a tent, his own portable "house." The ark of the covenant, the symbol of God's presence, has been housed in a movable dwelling. Prior to being united under one king, the tribes of Israel were wandering in the wilderness, so a portable dwelling for the ark made sense. But now that the Israelites have been brought together under the rule of David, perhaps it's better for the ark to be placed in a stationary building, in the holy city.

David looks at this situation and says, "Here I am, the human king, relaxing in a mansion, while the ark of God, the divine king, is living in a tiny house. What's wrong with this picture?" So David decides to build God a "house," a temple, the kind of dwelling that's fitting for the Lord. David shares this idea with Nathan the prophet, who gives it his full support. "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you" (v. 3).

But God has other plans. That very night, he tells Nathan to tell David "no." Turns out that God is perfectly content with his tiny house. He has never asked any of Israel's leaders to draw up plans and break ground for an upgraded residence. In fact, God goes beyond telling David to set aside his dreams of a temple. He basically says to David, "Rather than you building me a house, I'm going to build you a 'house,' a dynasty, that will last forever.

I already have a blueprint for an eternal kingdom that will be built out of you and your successors."

Eventually, David's son Solomon does construct a temple for the Lord. But at this point in the story, Solomon isn't even born. The focus here, in this time and place, is on God's freely given covenant, promising an eternal reign of peace and righteousness. In other words, God will not be bound, even by David's noble vision of a sacred dwelling in the holy city. He is not contained within a building. Instead, God is free to move and work in ways that overturn or rearrange human plans and purposes. His past dealings with his people, across generations, demonstrates his freedom and his faithfulness.

One person tells the story about a five year old who asks his mother, "Is God everywhere?" "Yes," said the mother. "Well, is he here in this room?" asks the child. "Yeah, sure he is." "Is he here on the table?" "Well, uh, yeah, in a sense I suppose he is. I can go with that," replied the mother. The child slowly picks up an open box and slams it shut, "Got him!"²

The God whom we worship and serve, the God who first called forth and created a congregation named Grace Baptist Church, is unboxable. Those who first broke ground on this site and then witnessed floors being poured, walls being raised, and a roof being completed, didn't, when it was all done, say of God, "Got him!" Though the building was finished, the congregation, the community of believers, was still under construction. And they, in eternal fellowship with us who have gathered here today, are God's primary way of taking up residence in the world. We the church are God's dwelling, a "temple without walls."³

A church anniversary sometimes becomes the occasion for homecoming, an opportunity to welcome back former church members or previous pastors. While this involves going back to a particular house of worship, in a particular location, it's most of all about returning to be with a particular household of faith. The fellowship of the faithful is the "home" to which people return. On anniversary Sunday, the expression "church home" takes on even greater meaning.

Marian Liataud writes about how she and her family moved many times. At one point, they even sold everything and moved onto a boat, which became their floating home for the next year. She assumed that her husband and four sons would love adventure and new challenges, which they did. "But they like it best," she says, "when there's a safe harbor to return to. Like the kind a home provides. And by that I mean a home built on a foundation, not the floating kind." She goes on to say, "I discovered this truth in the course of house hunting after our live-aboard year had ended. When we asked our sons which house they liked best of the ones we were considering, Jackson, then 12, sighed and said, 'I just want a place that stays a place.'"⁴

For so many of us, the church is a place that stays a place. Not simply because our congregation's address hasn't changed in the past six decades, but most of all because there's something deeply lasting about the bond that God forms between us through Christ. Being united to Christ and to one another gives our lives a sense of stability, a sense of rootedness, a sense that we really have taken up residence in a particular place, in a particular network of relationships, in a particular way of life called following Jesus. That's what it means to have a church home.

One pastor tells about attending a workshop where he and the other ministers at his table were asked to discuss issues that they were struggling to come to terms with. He talked about the decision he had made to return to a former church to serve a second time as

pastor. He said, "I think my heart was in the right place, but I'm not sure why I did it." That's when another one of the ministers, who was a pastoral counselor, said, "Oh, I know why you did it." "Do tell," he responded. And the gentleman said, "You were looking for home." The pastor acknowledged that yes, that was probably a big part of it.⁵

Looking for home. It's a search that often takes us back. Back to a particular place. Back to particular people. Back to particular memories. Back to sights and sounds and even smells that reconnect us with a space in which we felt settled, secure, and cared for. Sadly, many people struggle with that, because they never had a strong sense of home or rootedness. Family issues or conflict, mistreatment or neglect, financial hardship or other circumstances may have left them feeling like there is no home to go back to. Instead, they've tried to move on with life and cultivate a sense of home in a different place, in other ways.

But at the same time, for many others, the home that was somewhere there in the past has a great attraction to them. A few months ago, a technician came out to do some maintenance on some of our equipment here at the church. While he and I were finishing up the paperwork, we got into a conversation about some things going on in his life. In particular, his wife had been going through some major health problems. And all this at a time when they were starting to make retirement plans. He had been in the business a long time, and was ready to step out and move on to the next phase of life. The house where he grew up was in West Virginia, and he wasn't sure whether he and his wife were going to return there or maybe just sell the place. He had been in this area most of his life, but had never lost a sense of his roots back there. Near the end of our conversation, he said, "My dad took me out of there when I was three years old. I'm now 62, and have spent my whole life trying to get back there."

Trying to get home. It often feels like a journey back. But for God's people, it's most of all a journey forward. In our Scripture passage, King David was firmly rooted in the present. He had a nice, established house. God, meanwhile, had a portable house. In view of all that God had done for him, David wanted to do something for God by building him a more permanent house of his own. Plus, it was only fitting that since Israel was now a unified nation, there should be a national temple. But God wasn't in the business of making transactions that would keep him put. Instead, he was working on a building project that was way bigger than David, or any individual ruler, could grasp. God was constructing a dynasty, a forever house called the kingdom.

That kingdom, the reign of God, came to us through David's descendent named Jesus. As we hear in Luke's Gospel, "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end" (1:32-33). Now that's an enduring house, a dwelling more lasting than any of the ways that we experience home in this present world.

The life of the world to come, which will arrive in its fullness at the return of Jesus, is the house that God's people are meant to inhabit. This new creation in Christ will be filled with God's righteousness, faithfulness, love, and peace. For now, in this time between the first and the final coming of King Jesus, God has created the church to be a sign and foretaste of his reign. In one respect, the church is home, but only insofar as it points beyond itself to the everlasting kingdom that God calls us to inhabit. God has promised the completion of this house. He wants you to occupy it by faith, beginning now, and living toward the future.

¹ Michelle Trauring, "Tiny House vs. Mansion." October 18, 2018. Accessed September 11, 2019 <<https://sagharborexpress.com/tiny-house-vs-mansion/>>.

² Jeremy Begbie, "What's Mysterious About Worship?" Lecture delivered at Regent College (Vancouver, BC) on May 26, 2014.

³ David May, quoted in Bill Webb, "Church, Individual Are the Holy Spirit's Temple." Word & Way website. January 29, 2014. Accessed September 11, 2019 <<https://wordandway.org/2014/01/29/church-individual-are-the-holy-spirit-s-temple/>>.

⁴ Marian V. Liataud, "The Spiritual Discipline of Not Staying Put." Today's Christian Woman. February 20, 2012. Accessed January 11, 2014. <http://blog.todayschristianwoman.com/2012/02/the_spiritual_discipline_of_no.html>.

⁵ Michael Ruffin, "There's Someplace Like Home." NextSunday website. May 5, 2019. Accessed September 11, 2019 < <https://www.nextsunday.com/connections-05-12-2019-theres-someplace-like-home/>>.