

“Steadfast Love”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 19, 2009

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 89:20-29

Rev. John Wahl

2 Samuel 7:1-17

The summer in between my freshman and sophomore years in college, I worked with a man from my church named Phil Falk. Phil was an independent contractor – he worked mostly on home renovation projects. But that summer, he was building his own “spec” house – a ranch home in the Woods of St. Thomas: a neighborhood being developed on the property of the former St. Thomas Catholic seminary. The crew consisted of Phil, myself, and David Paul Searfoss – the youngest son of our church’s pastor, who was two years younger than I. During the course of the summer, we went about the meticulous process of framing the house – guided by a set of blueprints that Phil had designed himself years earlier, when his dream of building a house was first hatched.

This was long before the advent of nail guns and table saws. Every cut of timber was measured and re-measured before cutting with a simple circular saw and carefully nailing it in to the frame. Whereas many of the other construction crews in the area used 2 X 10s for the floor joists, we used 2 X 12s and instead of the typical 2 X 6s for the roof joists, we used 2 X 8s. Often, when a delivery of materials was dropped off or one of the various sub-contractors would come by, Phil would spend upwards of an hour shooting the breeze with them. Each day, we would break for a full hour at lunch not only to eat and rest, but to share a bible study devotion with one another. Our progress was often slow, but steady. By the time August rolled around, and it was time for the roof to go on, we did it ourselves – carrying the bundles up the ladder one-by-one, often in temperatures that surpassed 100 degrees.

Since this was a spec house, the three of us often wondered who would eventually purchase it: a young couple, a family with children, empty-nesters? Phil understood that it would probably turn out not be the cheapest home in the neighborhood, nor the largest or the flashiest; but given the abundance of care and quality of materials being invested, he was confident that the right person would appreciate its unique value. For someone, it would be a solid home: built carefully and lovingly by one true professional guiding two true novices.

Looking back, Phil served not so much as foreman for two of his young church members, but also teacher and guide. We learned a lot about construction – at least a little of which I have retained – but even more about having a steady work ethic and incorporating faith into your work. Interestingly, David Paul – the

pastor's son – went on to become a skilled woodworker and craftsman while I – completely unaware of it at the time – was subtly being groomed to become a pastor myself.

When we meet David in today's reading from 2 Samuel, he is already safe and secure in his own home. After having relocated to Jerusalem – and having brought the ark of the covenant to the holy city – David had a house of cedar constructed. The house represented not only stability, but a time of peace and prosperity: cedar being a sign of opulence and divine favor. With no enemies left to conquer, David turned his thoughts to God: wanting his Lord to enjoy the same permanence as he now did.

And so, David summons one of the prophets, Nathan, to share his plans to build a permanent home for God: a temple to replace the moveable tents which had housed the ark of the covenant for so many generations. The wandering of the people of Israel had come to an end, and David wanted to honor the God who had journeyed with them and allowed the people, and he himself, to prosper. This Temple would be like a “spec” house – befitting of an holy occupant; in ready-to-move-in condition to house the ark of the covenant.

After giving his initial go-ahead, Nathan goes home and that night has a dream in which the Lord speaks to him a message that is meant for David. Why, David is asked – through Nathan – would God Almighty need a permanent home? When had God even asked for such a thing? The answer actually was no; David should not construct a house for God, but instead God would create a different kind of house for David.

One of the marvels of the Old Testament is how the word of God so often comes in the form of complex and remarkable wordplays. Here, the word “house” takes on a number of important and overlapping meanings. To David, a house signifies his own newly found sense of peace and security. Imagine that a shepherd boy, the youngest and most unlikely son in his family, would ascend to become King of Israel. Imagine that this humble poet, who so often was the recipient of God's word, would surround himself with prophets who could now bring to him the word of God.

The house that David envisioned for God – a Temple built of wood and stone – was also to be one of peace and security. And yet, the house that God envisioned for David would provide security of a different kind. God was ready to grant David a dynasty – a lineage of spiritual and political leadership that would extend through the generations for all of eternity. Never again would there be the need to anoint a new king of Israel based on personal characteristics. Never again would someone be chosen from out-of-the-blue to be the king. The inevitable

abuse of power and royal incompetence notwithstanding, the royal line of David had been assured for all time through the steadfast love of God.

It is important to note that although God granted David and his descendents this particular kind of house, David was not allowed to build the Temple. Although he would direct the preparation of cedar planks for the eventual construction of God's house, it was David's son, Solomon, who was finally granted the privilege of building the Temple in Jerusalem. To David, God would remain a living and moving presence; unfettered by the walls of a Temple; not requiring the safety and security that David felt was needed.

And it is not too far down the road that David – wading too deep into the waters of his new-found security – forsakes God's trust through an adulterous affair with Bathsheba. It will again be Nathan, the prophet, who brings to David the truth of God's word. But, at that moment, the message is focused not on the steadfast love of God – which cannot change – but about the expectations of the covenant made between God and the Hebrews at Mt. Sinai. The commandments – both the ancient Decalogue as well as the commandments of love in the New Testament – are still important. Through sin, we turn ourselves away from God, and yet God is always there. God does not leave us; even when we cannot or choose not to see God. Although the penalties of breaking God's commands are real, the steadfast love of God always remains.

Far beyond the time that any house of Temple would have gone to ruins, the steadfast love of God lasts. Therefore, the gathering of the people of God, the church, is always more than the building in which it worships. And so it was that the Israelites could hold out hope for a messiah – an anointed one in the lineage of David – even centuries beyond the downfall of the nation of Israel. “God had promised to establish David and his line forever, and this is a “no matter what” promise, even if the descendents of David sin, even if evildoers threaten.”¹

When, in Luke's gospel, the angel announces to Mary that she will bear a son, she is told that “the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.” (Luke 1:32) In him, there will be fulfillment of God's promise of steadfast love; the unconditional grace that we find in Jesus Christ. Finally, an heir to the throne of David emerged who would not succumb to the temptations of sin, but instead offer himself selflessly, not just to the people of Israel, but to everyone. Because God's love in Jesus is unconditional, “God's grace provides a bedrock of hope in the midst of the consequences of human sinfulness.”²

¹ Kate Huey, “Wherever You Are” from *Weekly Seeds*

² *New Interpreters' Bible Commentary*, vol. 3

The houses of God that we construct to become Christian churches are not intended to securely hold God in, but to allow the living God to move in and among and through us. We build these structures in order to honor God, but in full realization that we cannot win God's favor. No matter how majestic the building, no matter how melodic the hymn, no matter how fervent the prayer, we cannot anoint ourselves as God's chosen ones. We can only receive the unconditional grace that God has already granted to us. As Paul says to the Romans, nothing in heaven or on earth can separate us from the steadfast love of God that we have in Christ Jesus.

It is both a marvel and also little wonder that over the past few weeks, a collection of this church's men – doctors, salesmen, engineers and accountants among them – have dedicated many hours of their evenings and weekends to construct a new bathroom in the barn of the church. All of the demolition, plumbing, electrical, wallboard and paint work have been done by volunteers – many of them skilled, but some novices having to learn along the way. Because of their selfless dedication, our youth and their leaders, who will soon be spending four days doing mission work here at the church, will have a nice, new working bathroom with shower facilities so that they might reside at the church and hopefully experience the same kind of spiritually-soaked work environment that I was able to take part in that one particular summer, twenty-one years ago.

In all of the ways that we work and worship, we do so not to earn something from God, but to live up to the royal lineage into which we have been adopted. Having the opportunity to worship outdoors – even if the weather does not always cooperate – reminds us not only of the majesty of God's creation, but also that God is not bound to one place, or one portion of our lives. The steadfast love of God – which spans across all generations – also reaches every aspect of our lives. It may not always be evident to us, but God is present: moving, speaking, breathing, and granting us opportunities to live in peace and serve in joy. Thanks be to God. AMEN.