

Fourth Sunday in Advent

HOUSING ARRANGEMENTS

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

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Analysis by Jerome Burce

1 Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, 2 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." 3 Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you." 4 But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: 5 Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? 6 I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. 7 Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" 8 Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; 9 and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. 10 And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, 11 from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that

the LORD will make you a house. 16 Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

DIAGNOSIS: “What A Shame!”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Wincing*

David means well. His aim? To rescue Israel’s God from the embarrassment of God’s shabby, itinerant circumstances (v. 2). His proposed method? A structure of David’s own devising that will serve to demonstrate his high regard for the LORD and to invite that same regard from others—fellow Israelites and defeated neighbors alike. To this day David’s well-meaning descendants keep enacting the ancestor’s dream. Church-building programs come to mind, obviously. But so do all those other structures we’ve inherited from prior generations: liturgies, theologies, ethical systems, ecclesiastical constitutions, ministerial and communal forms, etc., etc. These we burnish and reinvent over and over again, all our imagining, building, and maintaining being done “to the greater glory of God.” Or so we like to tell ourselves.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Blushing*

Then again, what’s David’s deeper aim? Or, to put that another way, whose embarrassment and insufficient glory is he really worried about? One thinks quickly of the teenager who objects to Mom’s choice of hat, coat, or lipstick as they head for the mall; or perhaps of the kid from the trailer park who can’t imagine inviting a friend to stay overnight. Or let’s think more pointedly of the Church’s endless striving for “relevance” by which we really mean attractiveness and respectability. To what end, this fevered refurbishing of message, mission, worship, etc.? Is it to glorify God or to save ourselves from being

caught with a deity that no one else admires or wants to associate with? Next question: Does anyone have to think twice to come up with the honest answer here?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Final Embarrassment*

Hence the impossible contradiction at the heart of David's scheme, and our schemes too. After all, the LORD's glory is that he gives "rest from all [one's] enemies" (vv. 1, 11), i.e. that he rescues. So how does one rescue such a God without mocking his glory? Or again, how does one build for the Builder ("I will make you a house," v. 11) without insulting the Builder? There comes a point at which mom will tell the objecting teen (see above) to go soak her head. Canny mom, after all, can read the teen's heart, and her patience has its limits. So also with God and all his Davidic children. The ones who effected David's specific dream learned this to their horror when the temple was razed (2 Kings 25:9, 13-15). These days Europe's cathedrals are empty, the American Protestant mainline is in decay, and one even hears reports of newfound dismay in the mega-church movement. Is anyone surprised? History testifies that any and every congregation of the well-meaning will at some point evaporate. It falls to the fool—as defined, reputedly, by none other than David—to call that accidental (Ps. 14:1). What news gets screamed by the local church's new-fangled columbarium? Sure, that enemy Death still stands; but worse, that God himself has yet to waver in his own implacable enmity to any and every scheme his devotees may hatch for rescuing him from anything. Now there's an embarrassment!

PROGNOSIS: "How Perfect is That?"

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The End of Embarrassment*

Razzle dazzle time. Leave it to the Rescuer to cinch his bona

fides with a stunning move that who but God could imagine, let alone execute. In brief: to save the embarrassed he becomes an even bigger embarrassment—bigger by far—than he was when we first noticed and winced. He starts as ever by making extravagant promises to the ludicrously undeserving, in this case David. In effect, “Leave the doing to me. I’ll make you a name [v. 9], a future [v. 10], a peace [v. 11], a house [v. 12], and all of it enduring.” Weirdly absent from this are the ifs, ands, or buts of the commonsense escape clause that every lawyer worth her salt would insist on, the chances being all too strong that David himself will embarrass his God (as indeed he soon does; see especially the Bathsheba episode, 2 Sam. 11). So how will God underwrite so foolish an undertaking? At length, in the fullness of time, by camping out in the flesh of David’s distant-though-direct descendent, Jesus of Nazareth, the new “tent” and “tabernacle” in which God “move[s] about among all the people” (v. 6; cf. John 1:14). Talk about shabby housing for a deity! Thrown together in shady circumstances (“that’s whose child, Mary?”), the LORD’s brand new digs are quickly tarred with “the sins of the world” (John 1:29), those of David and all his other descendants included. All too soon they’re torn to shreds with whip and nail in the ignominy of crucifixion. (Recall here the mock of the onlookers and countless others thereafter: “God dwells in that? Come down from the cross, you Son of God, ha, ha” (Mark 15:29-30).) What happens next? Easter; the everlasting restoration, that is, of God’s flesh-and-blood dwelling place who promptly dispatches emissaries to preach “repentance and the forgiveness of sins...in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47). Again, what gets preached and promised, no strings attached? Specifically, the end for all people of all embarrassment—God’s embarrassment with us and ours with God; the end too of all the enmity this entails (cf. v. 11b).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Beaming*

God promises. David trusts. He shelves his building plans and leaves it to God to set up earthly shop as God sees fit. And that's the reason—the only reason—that David will be known forever after as the good king. Thanks to an honest writer and the Spirit behind the honesty we get to see the rest of David's career as the wretched mess it was: adultery, murder, horrible parenting, and the bloody rebellion ensuing from that. Surely God winces, again and again, at the conduct of his king. Still, the Word has been uttered, the Promise spoken, and David keeps trusting that the LORD, far from embarrassing him, will make things every bit as right for him as the LORD has said he will. (For evidence of this trust see any and every Psalm attributed to David, beginning with 51.) Does God follow through? Well yes, as we've just reviewed in the step above. All the more reason that we who have seen the glory of his follow-through in Christ (cf. John 1:14) should trust as David trusted, and in that trusting to be as right with God—as wholly unembarrassed—as David was and still is.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Bragging*

An immediate consequence of that trust, and a sign of it as well, will be a newfound relish among David's churchly descendants for the arrangements God currently has in place for his saving presence on earth. These are nothing more and nothing less than the Promise preached and sacramentally administered among the two or three (at essential minimum) who are gathered in Jesus' name, the word of Christ crucified being lifted up for all to hear and sink their hearts into as the anchor of the promise (cf. Matt. 18:20). All the rest of it is fluff—useful, important fluff, some of it, but fluff even so. That includes the buildings, the liturgies, the constitutions, the ministerial configurations. It includes even the impossibly exquisite music of J. S. Bach for which the truster thanks God from the depths

of his soul and still calls it fluff. After all, he finally gets what God's glory is really all about, the Most High seeing fit to camp out with shabby sinners in every conceivable circumstance, the bleaker the better. This is glory turned on its head, measured not by the palaces it occupies but by the hovels it descends to. Paul, for one, exults in that (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26-31). Blessed be every other descendant of David who will start to do the same, no longer meaning well but doing well in splendid imitation of David's Son.