

*Do-Nothing David* (21Oct18)  
2Samuel7:1-17

A week ago, our building manager Anthony came back from getting various supplies at Menards. He said they had moved the Halloween display to make room for Christmas decorations. Anthony figured that—being a church—we might want to get in on a piece of that action and were running behind.

Well, last week we had a song from Hannah, of which Mary did a remix for her cover version. This week we have a promise spoken for David that gets echoed and repeated also to Mary before the birth of Jesus. It appears it's not just the corporate capitalist extravaganza, but also our Narrative Lectionary that's prompting us toward Christmas and a season pregnant with possibility.

But before I put up a big flashy twinkling star pointing toward baby Jesus, let's take seriously what's happening here in Hebrew Scriptures, in this part of earlier tradition.

Last week, we heard at the end of Hannah's song about our revolutionary God of reversals working through an anointed king. Already that was looking past Samuel as prophet, past the first king he anointed, Saul, toward David. David was that youngest child who had been out tending the sheep, the meek and weak who overcame the giant conquering Goliath. He played music to soothe the troubled spirit of Saul. And he became a skilled and dynamic leader.

As today's reading has begun, he has moved the capital to Jerusalem, from Hebron, closer to his hometown of Bethlehem. In the celebration of the move, David was dancing in front of the ark of the covenant—the special box that held the 10 Commandments and marked where God's presence rested—with David leading the parade, not acting with pomp and honor fitting a king, but with sheer enthusiastic delight.

This guy was good at worship and praise, and that devotion fits today's reading, where David said he wanted to build God a house, a temple, to move the ark of the covenant in from the tent of meeting to a permanent location, a beautiful

shrine, something that seemed fitting for his devotion. This was accentuated because David felt guilty for building himself a nice house, a palace with imported materials and immigrant labor.

During this stewardship season, I could mention that you've invested in your own houses, and wonder about David's guilt. I could point to grand and elegant cathedrals around the world, heartfelt projects invested in representing God's grandeur and glory, and I could tell you those structures, the biggest and best of their time periods, exemplify David's notion to build an appropriate house for God. Or we could notice that nowadays our magnificent expansions are about healthcare or entertainment or megamalls of glitzy shopping experiences.

But if you're feeling compelled about donations and financial contributions to our congregation, or are worried about whether you're feeling that way, and even if it would seem like a useful tool for me to clobber you with, the Bible story continues on: David thought he should build God's house, but would not.

That resolution began with Nathan the prophet telling King David, "do whatever you want." That's not our usual understanding of religious ethics or of expectations laid on us. We tend to live with the feeling we're failing, not doing it right, that there's something more we ought to do or ought to give. It's frequently accompanied by your feelings of guilt or inadequacy.

And so this is a stunning word of freedom: do whatever you want. You don't need to feel bound by obligations, as if somebody is holding a moral standard over you that you inevitably won't live up to. The prophet, the one who speaks the Word of the Lord, the angelic messenger of God directly says: "The Lord is with you. Do as you like. Whatever is on your mind. Go ahead!"

This is a really remarkable giving of permission, of license. You may think of the risks you've been holding onto, of ideas that excited you, of possibilities that seemed to have run into a wall.

On the other hand, it may be where your striving has been too excessive, where you felt

compelled to keep going, even when it seemed painful or fruitless, where responsibility made you feel whipped and driven, where there was no carrot but only stick. Set that aside. You need not feel the coercion to be so duty-bound. Instead, as the prophet says, “do as you like.”

If that seems like ridiculously good news (and I hope you can hear that surprise, that freedom, that overturning of a too-typical sense of God always trying to force you to be better, to do right, to do more), then hold onto your hats, because it gets even more intense.

David said he wanted to build a house for God. Nathan the prophet said it wasn't a requirement, but that David could do whatever he wanted. But then a follow-up message came from God, and Nathan had to offer a corrective, an intensification of the previous message: not only should David not feel obligated, God won't allow him to do something that he could feel as an obligation. God says, “You won't build my house.”

You have been freed from expectations that weigh you down. Still more, God forbids you from succumbing to such things. This may mess up a stewardship sermon, but if you're feeling guilt about what you donate here or how involved you are, then God tells you to stop, not to do it, that it's not for you.

God absolves David's sense of shame, that he's been too self-centered and should've been more pious in doing more for God, that he should've been more devoted and dedicated in celebrating and praising and glorifying God with some sort of accomplishment.

This relationship with God will not grow out of self-reproach or remorse, nor from your intensive efforts. Again, for any sense of divine mandate, that there are certain things you have to do to get on God's good side, that God frowns on you not trying hard enough or being a good enough person, for any concept that you're not living up to your potential, and how your internal so-called conscience tells you you're doing it wrong and aren't who you should be, for feelings of falling short and telling yourself you're a

disappointment, God puts a big red X over that, shutting down that internal dialogue, cancelling those demands, by ordering you to stop trying.

You're not going to build a house for me, God tells David. I'm going to build a house for you, a dynasty, a promise of eternal blessing for the house of David.

In the story, this promise is a ways off. God said that a son of David's would build the temple, but David hadn't even met the woman who would be that boy's mother yet. After their rocky relationship begins, the first son of Bathsheba will die shortly after childbirth, and David will grieve fiercely. Solomon will struggle with his family and stray from God. His descendants after will leave the kingdom a mess.

And yet here is God's enduring promise.

Which may bring us back to Mary and thoughts of Christmas. The God who says you can do what you want, and whose only restriction is to forbid you from those obligations that make you feel you're getting ahead or threaten to make you feel behind, we recognize this God in the birth of Jesus, not because he would grow up to be a mighty king winning battles like David, or because he would have wisdom and prestige like Solomon, or since he had the right DNA as a descendant, or would teach us how to behave rightly.

The angel proclaims favor to an expectant mother Mary and that this kingdom will have no end because God's will will be done, on earth as in heaven. Even more clearly than in the illustrious but fallible King David, better than anyplace else, Jesus shows us God's work in a birth as a baby to an unwed mother shut out from the glitz of celebration and any glory of sumptuous life.

Jesus grew to convey that this is God's work and not our own in welcoming every last outcast he can find, forgiving every sinner he meets, and offering wholeness and redemption to those who need it, while disparaging the self-righteous and scoffing at the pretentiously pious, and spurning the machinations of the temple, that alleged dwelling of God, disregarding its very destruction.

Jesus showed that this can't be wrecked by an empire, in spite of their heedless injustice, can't be undone by us followers who often forget to follow, can't be stopped even by vile and violent death. It's simply not dependent on you or your plans or timelines or sense of propriety and devout exertions.

This is God's effort. This is God's blessing. This is God's promise. If something gets in the way of that, don't do it. Otherwise, do whatever you want.