

Sermon July 19

2Samuel: 1-14a, Ephesians 2:11-22

President John F Kennedy famously said: *Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.* Today I want to turn that around and put it into a different context.

Ask not what you can do for your God, look at what your God is doing for you – in fact in you and with you.

Let God be God.

King David is nation-building. Just prior to the passage in 2 Samuel that we read today, David established Jerusalem as his political and military capital. It had been a long journey to this point. Throughout the First Book of Samuel David was in a struggle with the first king of Israel, Saul, against the backdrop of war with the Philistines. For much of the time he was a fugitive guerilla fighter and a mercenary. After Saul and his sons were killed by the Philistines, David emerged as the successor to the throne – and he achieved more than Saul could. He managed to unite all the tribes of Israel in himself and he establishes his capital in the neutral city of Jerusalem which is strategically placed a bit like Canberra between rival tribal lands.

And then with much fanfare and ceremony and joyous dance David finally brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem where it was set up in a special tent he had erected. The Ark of the Covenant or the Ark of the Lord was the most sacred object for the Israelites – The ark, a wooden chest which according to some traditions contained the tablets of the ten commandments, had led them in the wilderness and into the promised land and in military battle. It was the embodiment of the presence of God in their midst.

In his new capital David built himself a palace out of the finest material to be found – cedar. And then he turned his mind to building a temple. Up until this point God had been worshipped in a tent and a portable sanctuary known as the tabernacle. They that went wherever the people went. Now in a period of relative security and stability, David thinks about what he can do for Yahweh as the Israelites called their God. He wants to build a permanent home for worship of Israel's God, Yahweh.

And so David approaches the prophet Nathan with his plans which sound modest enough "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent". And immediately Nathan encourages him.

But then as he sleeps on it, Nathan has second thoughts. Nathan realizes in a vision when God speaks to him that David's plans raise all sorts of issues about who God is, what kind of God Yahweh is, and what building a royal temple will mean for the people.

Nathan is reminded that God has not been worshipped in a house since he brought the people out of slavery in Egypt. It is not that God is humbly declining a grand home to honour him. Rather it is that such a dwelling place - such a house or temple - does not express the nature of God. The God of Israel, like Jesus Christ in the New Testament, is a God on the move: A God who calls his people to follow. God has travelled with the ancient Israelites out of a place where they were held in captivity and God has travelled and provided for them through the difficult terrain of the wilderness into their new land and into relative peace and security. God is a God who travels with his people and so God's sanctuary should be a place like a tent that speaks of pilgrimage and journey rather than of permanence.

And so Nathan asks important questions: Can we house God within four walls? Is it appropriate? Is it what God wants? Would it not a temple box God in and deny the freedom of God to be God?

And then Nathan invites David to look back over his own personal life and to think about his experience of God. Over the past month or so I have had the privilege of being involved in thanksgiving services for three people who lived to great ages. As their families have told their stories all of which have involved joys and achievements and sorrows and tragedies and certainly great changes, there has been an incredibly rich interweaving of the presence of God along the journeys of their lives.

And now Nathan says to David: Look back: Remember when you were a shepherd boy out in the paddocks facing wild animals – God was with you. Remember when you fought the giant Goliath – God was with you there. Remember when you played your harp for King Saul - God was there and God has been with you all the way through the difficulties of dealing with all your enemies. God was with you when you were a fugitive and God is with you now as king.

No wonder David who was not only a warrior king but a poet would write *“Yahweh - The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. In grassy meadows he lets me lie. By tranquil streams he leads me to restore my spirit. He guides me in paths of saving justice as befits his name. Even were I to walk in a ravine as dark as death I should fear no danger, for you are at my side.....”*

And now God promises to be present with David into the future too but it will not be in a house built of cedar or bricks and mortar. There is a play on the word “house” in God's promise to David. It will not be about what David does for God in terms of nation- building - it will be in what God continues to do for David and the people he leads, the people of Israel. God promises to make David's name great and to establish the House of David. God will be present not in buildings but in family - a royal dynasty. God will establish for David a place in history. He can look to the future with anticipation and assurance.

And God's promise to David and his family in 2 Samuel Chapter 7 has no conditions – even if David or his descendants mess up and transgress, God's promise will remain. This is very important because David for all his charisma and accomplishments was a very flawed character and his family proved to be very flawed too.

If we look ahead for a moment, this covenant God makes with David seeds two important ideas that nourishes the faith and the hopes of the Israelites for generations to come especially when everything goes awry and the future looked grim – the first is that God's love is unconditional and full of mercy. The second is that from out of the House of David a Messiah would come. We saw this love and this Messiah who moved among the people full of compassion in our reading today from Mark's Gospel .

Historically the discussion of David and Nathan reflects a vigorous debate within Israel – a debate we still engage in: There were deep questions to do with the relationship of king and religion, church and state and accessibility to God at issue here. The temple argument ultimately won the day for David's son Solomon did build a temple in Jerusalem.

But at least for David the message seems to get across. Yahweh God is the God who lives and moves lightly in a tent. God does not dwell in a temple expecting people to come to him. And just as Yahweh has travelled with David wherever he had been through his life, this God travels with his people and ahead of his people and this God's freedom cannot be captured and contained. For David it would not be a matter of what he could do for God – building a magnificent temple is a glorious kingly gesture! – it would be what God would do for him by building a dynasty giving him hope and security into the future – a house that would need God's mercy and forgiveness and strength over and over again.

And so David the poet finishes Psalm 23 with

*Surely Goodness and faithful love pursue me everyday of my life.
I make my home in the house of Yahweh for all time to come.*

In other words David knew his place was in relationship with God and that was forever.

And you and me? the church called the household or temple of God in Paul's letter to the Ephesians? In Paul's day it was not about confining God to buildings but about religion trying to contain God within cultural and racial and theological walls. Paul talks about the household of God but it is in the context of God expanding the Christian community to make room for non-Jews. It is about building a house - a temple – but this temple is not built out of bricks fixed and immovable. It is built out of living stones - people – it is organic, built upon Jesus Christ as the cornerstone and housing God's powerful dynamic presence - the Spirit.

And so again we come to this understanding that God cannot be confined – this time to a race of people or an idea. God is wherever his people are and God is always beyond us and our understanding. It is not something that we have done. It is brought about by God who brings us through the cross of Jesus into one new community. It is God's gift.

Friends, these readings about God speak powerfully to me – and I pray to all of us.

They invite us to take the time to look back through our life: Can we see the presence of God travelling with us along the smooth and the rough, at the cross-roads, through the dark ravines and into surprising places? And then as we pivot to look ahead and move forward: Do we know that God travels with us? and yes, we may well ask what we can do for God but even more compelling we are invited to let go and to go forward with anticipation about what God will do for us – and **in** us and **through** us.

Secondly as we here in Roseville stand on a threshold with two fresh worship services beginning next week and our building project almost finished: These readings invite us to look back and see how God has been there all along the journey leading us and then to turn and to look forward and yes, ask where will I find my place and what can I do - but again more importantly to let go and move with anticipation for what God will do for usand most importantly what God will do **in** us and **through** us.

And as the Uniting Church: We are a pilgrim people on the move in God's world. Again we are invited to look back and see how God has travelled with us along the way and then to turn and look forward to the future with confidence and with anticipation at what God's Spirit of wisdom will yet teach us and at what God will do through us in the ministry of reconciliation; in bringing others home to God.

Friends, our God is a God who journeys with us. Wherever we are, God is there: God moves. We cannot confine God but in God's presence you and I have a place – a home forever and that's a promise!

Resources:

Kate Huey, *Weekly Seeds*, Wherever You are (july13-19),
<http://i.ucc.org/StretchYourMind/OpeningtheBible/WeeklySeeds?tabid/81/articletype..>

Howard Wallace, *Year B Pentecost 7*, <http://hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au?WebOTcomments>

Walter Brueggemann, *David's Truth In Israel's Imagination & Memory*, Fortress Press, 1985

