

Today's story highlights a tension between stability and innovation that is intrinsic to our long faith tradition. David has come to a sort of pause in his upward climb; he has survived his long war with Saul and has been anointed the second king of Israel. He has a lovely palace built out of cedar, and there are no immediate threats from external enemies. It seems to him that it would be appropriate now to build a permanent temple to house the ark of the covenant which has traveled in a tent, much-mended or replaced I suppose, since the time of Moses. At first the prophet Nathan agrees, but that night God tells Nathan to tell David not to build this temple, and that God will rather make a "house" for David, "house" being taken to mean a dynasty. "Your offspring [Solomon] . . . shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

We know that this story takes place in roughly 1000 BCE, and that David's dynasty will end in 587 BCE, about 400 years later, when the Babylonians burn Jerusalem and take the people into exile. Four hundred years is a good run for a royal family, but it's not "forever." We also know that the story took its current form (more or less) during the Exile, so the people re-telling it were acutely aware that David's throne had not been established "forever." Indeed, it had fallen, and there was never again a king of Israel of David's or anyone else's line. Yet they tell this story, and the hope for a messiah is planted as they begin to think about God's promise at a different level. If God is faithful, then God will keep this promise. But it must look different than they had thought.

Of course this is why we get the long genealogy in Matthew's gospel that establishes Jesus in the family line of David; the early church saw the fulfillment of

God's promise in Jesus. But it's possible even in this section of 2 Samuel to see more flexibility in the notion of the "house" of David. Without going into excruciating detail, I'll just tell you that scholars have pointed out that God's speech actually implies a patrilineage of *God*, rather than of David: the promise is that *God's* royal family will be established forever (Mark George, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, January 1, 2002). That would be us, the people of God.

But it's very hard to trust or count on or esteem something as amorphous as a people, particularly in contrast with a really good building. A Temple, such as Solomon built, or an imposing cathedral, or even just a well-designed church building, speaks volumes about the power and permanence of the God to whom it is dedicated. Not having a building ourselves, we can still appreciate the impact of high ceilings, gorgeous windows, good acoustics and soaring sightlines in other houses of worship. When you're feeling tossed and battered by the storms of life, there's nothing like a solid church building to reassure you.

I am reminded of a segment of an educational video I always show about Pure Land Buddhism in Japan. Pure Land Buddhism was developed by an 11th-century monk who felt that Buddhism was not reaching ordinary working people who didn't have the resources to meditate rigorously. It's a Buddhism for the proletariat. One of its temples, in Kamakura, was destroyed by a tsunami in the middle ages and the enormous Buddha statue that had been inside was exposed to the elements, tarnishing and weathering. A priest decided to rebuild the temple, but that night the Buddha appeared to him in a dream and told him not to, that the temple had been a prison and that he wanted to be out in the open air—storms,

cold, heat-- just as the workers were. And the Kamakura Buddha sits out in the open still today.

So it's a Buddhism for the masses, but over the years they have built very lovely temples, with exquisite art on their walls. The narrator of the video goes to one of the temples and comments on how distant it seems from the working-class roots of Pure Land. He asks his local guide if the temple is central to Pure Land Buddhism, and the guide gives him this extremely clunky answer: "We have a saying: Every morning and evening you should worship, and once a week you should go to the temple." (Maybe it's cooler in Japanese.) The narrator apparently finds this un-useful, and asks a different way: "If I want to see Pure Land in action, should I go to the temple or to a home?" And the guide admits, he should go to a home.

So they visit the home of a shoe-shop owner, above the shoe shop. The grandmother greets them and takes them upstairs to talk, where the daughter-in-law is washing dishes and the children are watching sumo wrestling on TV. There is a little figurine in a case, a sculpture of a mother pulling up the pants of a toddler, and the grandmother points to it, saying that the warmth of the Pure Land is the warmth of the home. Indeed, it is her conviction that all people regardless of religion are welcomed to the Pure Land at death. Clearly the real power of the Pure Land experience is most visible in people's love for one another, despite the elegance and beauty of the temple.

Something like that is going on as the exiled rabbis of Judah think back on God's promise to David. David's son Solomon did built the first Temple, giving the

ark of the covenant a more adequate shelter, but that Temple didn't last, did it? The Babylonians burned it down just like they'd burn any Canaanite temple down. They took captive the last descendant of David to sit on the throne, and that throne was no more. Reassuring as a building is, reassuring as an enthroned king is, those can be vaporized. What persists is the sonship, if you will, of God's people.

In Luke's gospel God is housed not in walls of cedar or gold but in Mary's womb, and then in the flesh of a Palestinian peasant. A womb, a barn, a child—those are now the dwelling places of God—and actually have been all along. But accepting that means accepting that the assurance of God's power and faithfulness is not in strong buildings but in fragile people. It means trying to understand vulnerability on God's terms. It means building community across divisions rather than turning inward to safe enclaves, because when we experience unlooked-for commonality or become aware of our essential unity, that's the sign of God's presence.

The myth of the Buddha of the Pure Land is that he was a monk who amassed tremendous power through his spiritual achievements. Out of compassion, he created the Pure Land which is a place where you can go when you die and do your meditation, but it's way easier there than it is here, and you'll become enlightened faster. The birds sing dharma songs all the time, and there are no obstacles to meditation like having to go pick up your kids or discovering that the bank sold your mortgage and you're overdue on a payment. The first adherents of Pure Land Buddhism were laborers, fishermen, and prostitutes—people who really couldn't keep up a rigorous schedule of meditation but who understood friendship and love. The Pure Land is established for “ordinary sentient beings of impure karma.”

(repeat) When I tell that to my students, I show them a photo of my cousin holding his son. There is a large fire extinguisher prominently displayed in the background, my cousin is overdue for a haircut, and his son looks slightly cross-eyed. They are utterly comfortable and happy together. They are ordinary sentient beings of impure karma, and knowing that they have crossed oceans and endured tragedies in order to become father and son, I am awestruck at the sheer persistence of God. Love is a monument far greater than any temple or church building, all the more stunning for being embodied in fragile flesh and blood. Even in exile, the rabbis knew God was indomitable, and if we have eyes to see, we will know it too.

Let us pray.

God of hope,

You promised to make David's household great among the nations. Then you sent your son, Jesus, to transform this world so that all people are one in the great household of God. Show us how to live as your children, as sisters and brothers in your holy and blessed realm, in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, who will one day welcome us all home. Amen.