

Our Homes, the Homeless, and the Lord's House

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 7th Sunday after Pentecost, July 7, 1991. Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 7:1-17; Psalm 89:20-37; 2 Corinthians 12:1-10; Mark 6:1-6.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Friday I took my family down to Washington D.C. to see the sights and remind the boys of our heritage over the long 4th of July weekend. I was in one of my Walter Mitty moods on my way down and so I daydreamed. I imagine that I was driving down to Washington at the request of President Bush whom I was to meet in the oval office.

When I got there, I left Kay and the boys to tour the White House while I met with the President. The President's dog ^{Millie} came over, sniffed me and then lay down at my feet. President Bush stood behind his desk and said, "Ted, I've heard about your fire up there in Oxford. What a loss you've suffered. I'm also aware of the role the Oxford church has played in the life of our nation. And as you know I'm a man of faith. The church has always been important to me. And when I heard about your church I said, 'I want to help'. I want to rebuild your church, the whole thing, the steeple, organ, sanctuary, everything."

I was overwhelmed by this unbelievable offer and I immediately said, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you." I could hardly wait to tell everybody the news. Think of the prestige of having our church rebuilt by the President of the United States.

But then the Lord spoke to me. "Tell President Bush: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? Did I ever say to any President, 'Why have you not

built me a house?"

When I heard the Lord say this to me my first response was, "Oh, no, Lord! Please Lord! Let him do it. What minister ever turned down such an offer from such a prestigious person?"

Like President Bush, David was his nation's leader. David was basking in the glow of a military victory that left Israel, for awhile, as the undisputed power in that region of the world. He was the most popular ruler Israel ever had. He lived in a magnificent royal palace in Jerusalem, the new capitol of Israel. But at the time, there was no National Cathedral, no central place of worship where the nation could celebrate its victories.

So David summoned the prophet Nathan and shared with him his plans. Nathan was thrilled at David's offer to build the Lord's house and told David, "The Lord is with you." Nathan went home that night elated.

But that night Nathan couldn't sleep. At first he thought his insomnia was a result of his excitement. But as he lay awake in the middle of the night he began to have troubling thoughts. "Did the Lord ever request a house? Does the Lord even need a house? Is this offer simply David's way of trying to manipulate the Lord? Is he trying to get the support of the Church and its leaders for his plans and programs? After all, how can the church be critical of a leader who disobeys the will of God when that leader has just built a magnificent house of worship."

Nathan wondered, "How can I speak to the King about the problems of homelessness and inadequate housing; how can I address the King about God's will

for the poor, the dispossessed, and the oppressed when I've received such a magnificent gift from him. The more Nathan thought, the more he realized that the Lord was speaking to him.

"Since when do I need a house?" the Lord says. "I prefer a tent to a temple. You go tell David that he's not to build me a house."

Like all preachers Nathan liked to please those to whom he preached the Word of God. But he was also a faithful preacher which meant that when God gave him something to say he said it and let the chips fall where they may. He had the unenviable task of going to the King and telling him, "The Lord says, 'Thanks, but no thanks.'"

The governments of all the nations of the world have always tried to domesticate God. This was just as true of Israel as any other nation. David is described as a "man after God's own heart"; he was a sincere person who sought to please God but our Reformed faith teaches that the motives of even the best of leaders is mixed with self aggrandizement.

Edward Gibbon, in his classic, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, wrote, "All religion was considered to be equally false by the philosophers; equally true by the people; and equally useful to the politicians." It's simply human nature for a nation's leaders to attempt to use religion to further their own policies.

As I thought about what the Lord said to David through the prophet Nathan, I thought, "I want to be like Nathan. I want the boldness to speak the Word of God and not just please powerful people". The church of God is called, not to bless

whatever the nation's leaders do, but to speak the Word of God to the government and to national leaders. This is something that will become increasingly clear as we continue to read the story of David and the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel.

I'm glad I'm a member of a church which historically has sought to preserve the separation of Church and State. We've worked hard to maintain the separation of Church and State, not so the Church can do its thing and let the state do its thing; not because we believe the Church's job is purely spiritual and the nation's job is purely secular. We've worked hard to maintain this separation, rather, so the Church might be free to speak the Word of God to the nation and to the nations leaders. If Church and State are not clearly separated the danger is that the Church will be held hostage by the government.

I hope that when we eventually walk into our new sanctuary it will be clear that it is the Lord's house; that it belongs to the Lord and that it unequivocally proclaims the Lordship of Christ. The Pulpit, Communion Table and Baptismal Font all point to the Blood of Christ through which God has reconciled people from every nation unto himself and called us into the Kingdom of God which transcends all nationalism. .

I also believe the flag of the United States of America should be in our new sanctuary. Only I hope that it won't be up there with the Pulpit, Communion Table and Baptismal Font. If the Pulpit, Table and Font point to the Blood of Christ, the The American Flag points us to the blood of men and women who have died to make us a free and independent nation. The American Flag, therefore, should be

displayed with the people to whom it points; displayed, perhaps, near the central door in the rear of the sanctuary where it can be clearly seen from the pulpit, not to intimidate the preacher but in order to remind the preacher that the Nation and its leaders need to hear the Word of God as well as the congregation.

The best leaders in our Church, like Nathan, have not hesitated to speak the Word of God to the nations leaders from the time of the Revolutionary War to the present. There's always the temptation of wanting so much the approval of those in authority; wanting so much the prestige of being associated with national leaders that we don't speak the Word of God. We're afraid. This is something we need to be reminded of as we have just celebrated the Fourth of July and when we are still euphoric about our success in the Gulf War. Amen.

Let us pray: O God, our Lord, you have taught us that you are the ruler of all, the power above all powers. We commit into your hands all the rulers of the earth, all presidents, kings, queens, ministers and dictators; and we pray, most merciful Lord, that your will may be done upon earth, that you will raise up those whom you will raise up, and throw down those whom you will throw down. And may we all have confidence that you alone are the creator and destroyer of kingdoms and governments and nations, even to the end of time; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.