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 2 Samuel 7:1-17; Mark 6:30-46; Hebrews 3:1-6  
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### GOD'S HOUSE

From the Letter to the Hebrews: "We are [God's] house, if we hold fast the confidence and the pride that belong to hope" (3:6).

If I could pick only one story that reveals the possibilities and problems that people like us encounter in our life with God, it would be the story of David as told in the book of Samuel, the deeply moving and ultimately tragic story of someone who is in many ways like us: intelligent and well placed, possessed of a certain charm, even charisma. In a word, David is powerful—like us, but more so. David is a much bigger character than any of us, and it is just because he is larger-than-life that we can see in him something of ourselves, especially the unresolved tensions and contradictions in our life with God. The story of David and God is surely one of the greatest love stories ever told. It is accurate (if unconventional) to call it a love story, for God chooses David to be an intimate, "a man after his own heart" (1 Sam.13:14), as the prophet Samuel says. At the outset, God's hopeful love casts David in the best possible light, just as ours does when we are newly in love.

Yet as the story unfolds, it becomes evident that David's heart can never be one with God's, because he is so full of himself. Once David becomes king, his life is governed far less by devotion to God than by all the other passions of his heart, chief among them imperial ambition, so even though God gives David rest from his enemies all around (2 Sam.7:1), nonetheless he continues his wars of aggression (2 Sam.10-11). David is ruled also by self-indulgence, so he permits himself to bed and impregnate the wife of his closest friend, and then David has to murder him to cover it up; again, he spoils his royal sons, with the result that there is constant strife in his household and his kingdom. Furthermore David is ruled by the desire for vengeance, a desire so strong that on his deathbed he busies himself ordering the executions of those against whom he still holds a grudge (1 Kgs.2:5-9). And always, always, David is gripped by the anxiety that is the surest sign of a human heart not fully joined to God's heart. David's anxiety is what emerges in our passage this morning—and if we listen with spiritual alertness, I think we can discern how God's own heart even now begins to ache over David, with an ache that only deepens as their story goes on.

The part we have just heard comes early in David's kingship. Significantly, this is the first verbal exchange, the first conversation (you might say) between God and David, although it is mediated by Nathan the prophet. As you know, a good storyteller (and this writer is a great one) gives you clues especially at the beginning of a tale. And so it is here, in the very first verse: "Now when the king sat in his house, and YHWH had given him rest all around from all his enemies..." (2 Sam.7:1). Thus the scene is set for what follows: David is secure on the throne; God has "given him rest." "Rest"—it's one of the most important words in the whole Bible, something like a code word, summing up all that God longs to give us. Rest is a *given* for King David, or it should be—something given and assured by God. Maybe all the tragedy that marks his life comes down in the end to just this one thing: never can David let himself rest in God.

As is typical of the restless, David has a plan to make himself more secure, and like all pious ambitious people, he includes God in his plan. “So the king says to Nathan the Prophet, ‘Look here, I am sitting in a house of cedar, while the Ark of God is sitting in a cloth-tent.’” You can tell that David has set his heart on building a proper temple, a royal chapel, and Nathan his court prophet falls right in line with that suggestion: “Go on; do it; God is with you.” It is well to remember that even competent religious leaders like Nathan (and Nathan is certainly a good-enough prophet)—they don’t always know what God is up to. That very night God comes to Nathan and says, “You tell David this for me: ‘Did I ask you to build me a house? I’ve always lived in a tent, ever since I brought Israel out of Egypt. In all this time, hundreds of years, have I ever said, Why haven’t you built me a house of cedar?’” (2 Sam.7:2-7).

A house of cedar—that is the key term in this exchange between David and God. They’re talking giant timbers, not cedar shakes. Great cedar trees, suitable for building a house for a king or a god, were found not in the hills immediately around Jerusalem but rather 100 miles to the north, in the mountains of Lebanon. David and other ancient Near Eastern kings imported cedars of Lebanon as routinely as national leaders in our age import Middle Eastern oil, and for exactly the same reason: access to power. In David’s world, if you could get cedar, you could be a player. You could build tall-masted ships and engage in international trade on a grand scale. Cedar was the luxury building material for public buildings, elegant palaces and temples that carried the fragrance of the great north woods. According to the ancient pagan mythology of Canaan, the gods themselves lived in the cedar forests of Lebanon. In that world, then, the aroma of cedar was the smell of power. That is why David wants to build God a big cedar house like his own and install God in conspicuous splendor right next door to the palace. He is counting on God to be a prestigious and useful neighbor.

So God’s word to David is this: “I, God, am building a house for you, David, not vice versa” (2 Sam.7:11). What God wants is a faithful royal house, faithful leadership for the people Israel, not architectural power-enhancement as David imagines. Indeed, the book of Samuel shows a God who is immensely powerful and at times unpredictable, resisting containment either in a house of cedar or in the political program of any king. And already young King David has witnessed something of God’s uncontainable power. Just before the present encounter, he brought up to Jerusalem the Ark of the Covenant. For Israelites, that Ark was the most holy artifact, the centering place of God’s power. But during the move someone touched the Ark of God incautiously, and power flashed out, deadly as the charge from a hot wire (2 Samuel 6). Maybe that is another reason why David wants to build a cedar temple for God. Maybe he imagines it will render God’s high-voltage presence safe for the consumer; it would be useful to have a god who is powerful yet tame enough to do his bidding. In other words, David would like a god just slightly less powerful than he himself is. Probably most of us religious people spend some portion of our lives wishing for, even worshipping that kind of tractable, highly employable God, who is contained by our desires and takes direction from our prayers. The idea is initially attractive, of course, but the sad irony is, if you hold onto that false image of a tame god, then you will be perpetually anxious. For if you believe that you are managing and directing God’s power, then everything depends on you, as far as you can see. So as long as you hold onto that false image, there is nothing the real God can ever do or say to take away your anxiety.

Exactly so here: no assurance, no promise from God can relieve David’s anxious self-concern. Having already given David rest from his enemies, God now promises him everything else, everything: “My steady love will not depart from you....Your house and your kingship will be

secure forever...; your throne will be established forever” (2 Sam.7:15-16). God might have saved the breath, for David responds with a prayer that shows he has heard nothing. He goes on (I am filling you in on what happens after the part we just read)—he goes on to cajole God, asking for what has already been granted: “You’ve given me a house, Lord, but that’s a little thing for you. Now bless it; make it last forever” (2 Sam.7:18-19). Poor David; he doesn’t get it. This is the moment for gratitude, for resting on God’s promise of faithfulness to the royal house and the people Israel. But even the God who is all faithfulness cannot satisfy the need for assurance in this restless heart. David demands more promises from God, more military victories. Compulsively he tries to secure what has already been freely granted, relying on himself more than on God’s power and faithfulness. In the end, of course, David only destabilizes what God secured. The man whose heart was to be bound to God’s own heart acquires the habit of perpetual fear. By the end of his life, King David, like King Saul before him, is terrorized even by God (2 Samuel 24). It is a tragic end for the one to whom God promised rest from all his enemies.

Why do you suppose the Bible tells us so much about David, and so much of it not edifying? His is the most detailed story of anyone in the Bible, except for Jesus. Perhaps we need to know David well because we share so many of his dispositions. Like him, we trust ourselves more than we trust God; we prefer our plans for the future over God’s; and as a consequence we live in perpetual anxiety. I have some years of personal experience in this; probably some of you do as well. But thanks be to God, David’s personal history is not the whole story of God’s faithfulness to the house of David, nor is it the best part. A thousand years later, Jesus, born to the royal house of David, reopens this story and opens it wide to hope.

Like his great ancestor, Jesus-Son-of-David (Mark 10:47) works to establish a house, a kingdom that will endure forever in God’s sight, but with this difference: in all Jesus’ work he rests in the power of God. Recall that story we heard a few weeks ago, when Jesus sleeps peacefully in the middle of a killer windstorm on the Sea of Galilee. The boat is being swamped, the disciples are panic-stricken, and there lies Jesus on that infuriating cushion in the stern, wholly at rest in God (Mark 4:35-41). Again today, the apostles come back from a mission trip, full of “all that they have done and taught,” and Jesus says to them, “OK, fine. Now come away to a quiet place, by yourselves, and rest a little” (Mark 6:30). And out of that rest, even that small but perfect rest in God, flows power and abundance, enough to meet the needs of all the crowds who follow them in hunger and confusion. And again, after all have eaten their fill, Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray, to rest in God (Mark 6:46). This is the pattern of Jesus’ ministry, and the pattern he would have us learn so that we may be free enough to let God’s power flow through us:

first, rest in God;  
then, serve God’s people;  
then again, rest in God.

In our culture, the resting-in-God bit is the harder one to learn. We talk a lot about service at a chapel and university like this one, and that is good, very good—but sometimes you have to go out of the way to learn about resting in God. Ultimately I suppose, you must learn about rest from Jesus, but it helps very much to know an ordinary person, a neighbor, who is in the habit of resting in God. So look around you; look for someone who seems to be relaxed, spiritually speaking, taking pleasure in the company of God. This is perhaps the most surprising thing about people who are very close to God: they are much less serious than we would expect. They have a joy and lightness about them, even though their responsibilities may be weighty, their

troubles real and deep. Two years ago I made my first trip to Southern Sudan, to visit that church, which has been persecuted for half of its 100 years of existence. (Jo Wells will set off on a similar visit in a week or so.) I had fortified myself emotionally for what I expected to be the teeth-gritting experience of a lifetime. It never once occurred to me that I would have fun among the Christians of Sudan. But I did. For day after day I was surrounded by joy and laughter and outpourings of love. Of course, everyone I met, except for the tiniest children, had suffered terribly. By then peace accords had been signed, but the suffering produced by twenty years of genocide was not over, and for many it will never be entirely over. Yet everyone spoke to me of the goodness of God—because they were alive, because they could now see the beginning of an answer to their prayers for peace, because I had been able to come to Sudan and we could study Bible together, because today there was food enough for everyone to eat. If you are a Sudanese Christian, you don't waste your spiritual energy trying to contain God's power. Having so little control over many aspects of your life, you learn to trust in God's power, to rejoice daily in every evidence, small and great, that God's faithfulness is something more than a scam, a bad biblical joke. Day by day you cultivate in your heart the habit that the Letter to the Hebrews calls "the confidence and the pride belonging to hope." That is how we become God's house, by "hold[ing] fast the confidence and the pride that belong to hope" in God (Heb.3:6).

People like the Christians of Sudan know they must be *God's* house, for the simple reason that they are still standing, and they lack the strength to stand on their own against all their enemies. They are a striking yet far from isolated example of people who have found rest in God, who rest in God's faithfulness with confidence and pride. If you open your eyes you will begin to discover other such people here and there, who have relaxed their power grip and are now enjoying the good company of God. Like the Sudanis, many of those well-rested people have come home to God by way of bitter anguish and loss. Yet in God's house there is joy, the joy of gratitude and hope. Why don't you go over and join that company? I bet you could use a little rest.