



## *The Houses We Build*

Text: 2 Samuel 7: 1-13

Luke 2: 1-7

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What does your dream house look like? Derek and I are at the stage of life when we go to a lot of housewarming parties, as our friends all buy their first homes. At these gatherings, I'm always struck by the conversations we have, and how different they are from those we had five years ago. Back in our carefree twenties, I'm sure we never dreamed that mortgage rates and floor tiles and cabinet fixtures would be so fascinating! We have a few friends outside of Toronto whose homes we especially love, and on the drive home, there's always a bit of envy in the air – isn't their kitchen gorgeous? Boy, I'd sure love to have an ensuite bathroom. A finished basement – drool! We actually have a cozy little suburban townhouse of our own that we quite like – but it's a hobby to fantasize about how we could make it better. We have a long list of stuff that needs fixing, and improvements we'd like to make. We're still imagining our dream house.

These fantasies percolate in our minds from a young age – long before we ever own a home, we think about the sorts of things that would make it "really great." It starts with Barbie's bright pink dream mansion, or the fun and wacky Mickey Mouse Clubhouse. Maybe a father sits down with his kids one Saturday morning to draw up plans for a tree fort. I remember once, around age 10, spending an entire weekend in the basement with the cardboard box that had once housed our family's first microwave. I transformed that box into a veritable palace for my dolls, complete with indoor swimming pool and library. I also remember being fascinated by the homes whose interiors I couldn't see – the inside of Casey & Finnegan's tree house on Mr. DressUp was one, Snoopy's doghouse was another – did you know he had a pool table in there? We all have things that we dream of, the luxuries that will transform our spaces from mere dwellings into perfect homes.

This morning's scripture that Elizabeth read finds King David in exactly this frame of mind. In those days, the monarchy was still a new concept, and David's beautiful palace of cedar had only recently been built. In this palace he sat, gazing out the window at the Tent of Meeting – the house of God. There was no temple at that time, just a tent that moved from place to place, wherever the Israelites happened to be settled – in this case, Jerusalem. Inside the tent was a box called the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the stone tablets of the Law, the Ten Commandments. It was here, in this tent – the Holy of Holies – where God was thought to live. And as David looks out at this sacred spot, he has a sense that something is just not right. "Here I am," he says to his prophet, Nathan, "living in this beautiful palace of cedar wood, while my God resides a tent. How can I be in such luxury while God is in such humble dwelling?" So David begins planning to build a better house – a temple – for the Holy of Holies. At first, Nathan agrees but that night he hears the voice of God: "Does my servant David really want to build me a house? I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought my people out of Egypt. All this time I have moved from place to place, wherever the people have gone, with a tent as my dwelling. Did I ever say, build me a temple out of cedar?" David feels guilty about his luxury palace but God, it seems, is quite fine in the tent. God never asked for a temple, and doesn't desire David to build one.

Fast-forward a few hundred years now, to the birth of Jesus. By the time Luke sat down to write his story of Jesus' life, thirty or forty years had passed since his death on the cross. We are pretty sure that Luke wrote his Gospel after Mark, and that he used Mark's document as one of his sources. But Mark begins with Jesus as an adult – he does not tell us anything of Jesus' childhood, or of his birth. Luke and Matthew both create birth narratives for Jesus, and the two stories are very different from one another. Matthew gives us Herod and the three wise men, but Luke gives us the shepherds and the stable. This is important – Luke is the *only* Gospel author to name the stable as the place Jesus was delivered. No other author tells the story this way; indeed, by the time John's Gospel was written several decades later, these images of mangers and straw and cows had been edited out completely. I tell you this so that we can be clear: Luke was essentially starting from scratch when he designed this birth narrative. He could have chosen any backdrop he liked for the birth – and he chooses to have the baby Jesus begin his life among the animals. To say it another way, Luke builds a dream home for the Messiah, and what he builds is a barn. A stable.

Why does Luke do this? The conventional wisdom on the subject is that the stable symbolizes poverty, homelessness and rejection. This is true. Luke's Gospel is uniquely concerned with Jesus' care of marginalized people. Luke's Jesus intentionally ministers to those outcasts of society that others can't be bothered with – tax collectors, prostitutes, foreigners and the like. So it makes perfect sense that Jesus is born into a marginalized life of his own. His parents were poor and unmarried, his father a carpenter, and there was no room for the little family at the Inn, so the story goes. He didn't have an easy life, and this begins at the moment of his decidedly unglamorous birth. Jesus is equipped for empathy towards his followers; he can speak to them authentically because he has walked more than a mile in their shoes. He knows their life very well indeed, because it's his life, too.

But there's something more to the manger, I believe, this bed shared by the cows. When Luke says "there was no room in the inn", he isn't talking about a Super 8 with hot showers, continental breakfast, and a barn way out in back. The word "inn", as read here, actually translates more closely to "guest room." Imagine a sort of guesthouse in which there was a level for people and another, separate level for animals – but everyone was actually housed in the same building. This is the sort of structure that Luke is talking about. When Mary and Joseph sought a room in this house for the night, there was no space left in the area for people, and so they ended up on the animals' side. What we have, then, is this image of a noisy, messy, smelly house full of men and beasts alike. The guests would sleep on a different floor, sure, but everyone was actually together under the same roof, and the people would be very aware of the presence of animals among them. Probably the cows kept them awake with their mooing, putting our neighbour's yappy dog into perspective. Probably straw was tracked back and forth down the hall, much in the same way that sand from the beach always makes it home in the suitcase.

A stable is no place for a birth, and a manger no bed for an infant. We have always been slightly scandalized by the idea of this poor baby lying in the itchy, dirty straw. So what was Luke trying to prove? Surely not just that Mary and Joseph were poor, or that Bethlehem was crowded at census-time. There are lots of ways that Luke could have made that point, he didn't need a stable to say that. No, the stable is unique, because a stable is *where the animals live*. The dream home for the Messiah was a house full of animals. Full of *nature*, and all its ensuing messiness and smelliness. Not a hospital, or a palace, or a temple, or even a guest room. When sacredness comes to live on earth, it lives with the beasts.

Is it possible, then, that Luke is trying to create a saviour that is connected to *all* of nature? Perhaps Jesus is not just a saviour for humanity, but for the whole created world. If sacredness lives beside the beasts, doesn't that suggest that this creation, too, is sacred? The birth happens among the animals, and who, according to Luke, are the first ones to hear of it? The shepherds and their flocks. Remember, in Luke, there are no Wise Men, no Kings – only shepherds, outside on the hills, tending their sheep. They got the news before anyone else; the first to visit the new baby were the sheep. Here is Luke again, lifting up the beasts, lifting up those who reside in nature. We see it once more in Jesus' family history. Both Matthew and Luke construct genealogies – family histories – for Jesus, in order to connect him to the ancestors of the faith, giving “respectable relatives” to an illegitimate child. Again, Luke and Matthew do different things here. Matthew traces the birth of Jesus to back to Abraham, but Luke extends the family line all the way back to Adam, the very first human. When looking for an ancestor for Jesus, Luke chooses a man who lived among the animals, in the most perfect creation ever known – the Garden of Eden. Luke ties the Messiah to creation. Sacredness, says Luke, lives in nature.

Which is, if we go all the way back to poor King David feeling sad in his palace – the very same message given by God to Nathan. Don't build me a temple, says God, I don't need it. My dream home is right here, in this tent, outside. Outside, I am close to my people and close to the world. God does not want David to build a temple, so that holiness is further removed from nature. God dwells outside, in creation. This really isn't much of a stretch, is it, when we think of how most of us wax rhapsodic about how much we love our cottages. Why do we city-dwellers love our cottages so much? Because they bring us into closer community with the land. All of a sudden we can splash in the water, hear the rain, smell the outdoors. We delight in the deer and birds and frogs. And there's a certain sense of rightness that prevails when we are there. In the ever-present conversation about summer worship in this congregation, we hear over and over again that many view their cottages as sacred space. They consider their time outdoors as worship. And that's not just an excuse – there's truth in that statement. We do, absolutely, find God in nature.

Both Luke and Nathan are telling us that our relationship to the created order is critically important – so important, in fact, that the very incarnation of sacredness chooses to house himself there. And yet our dwellings, the houses we dream of and build today, only serve to remove us from that order. Think of the way we build our homes. What are the things that are important to us? We dream of a detached house, with walls that belong only to us, so that we don't have to listen to our noisy neighbours. Derek and I lived in our house five years –five YEARS! – before we made a real friend in our neighbourhood – an actual, honest-to-goodness, leave your spare key at her house, friend. And I don't believe we're that far outside normal. Wherever you go in this city, houses are built the same way. We see long driveways, houses set back from the street as far as possible. Air conditioning and heating systems so efficient we never have to open a window. Two car garages so we don't need to walk anywhere. Indoor gyms and treadmills so we don't have to walk outside. Rowing machines and NordicTracks to simulate boats and skis. We fence off our backyards, and build high hedges. Heavy curtains and tinted windows keep out the heat of the sun and give us privacy, our dearly-loved, cherished, protect-it-at-all-costs privacy. There is a house on our block that has SEVEN visible Alarmforce stickers. What statement does that make? Don't you dare come into my home. This is MY sanctuary. MY fortress. Keep out.

The choices we make about our houses speak volumes about our values. We build these dream homes, designed so thoroughly to keep us inside, and keep the world out. And by that I mean both people AND nature. The world, you see, is a messy place. It's noisy and dirty. There are animals out there and smells. People we might have to talk to. Wind and rain, hot and cold. We work so hard to insulate our dwellings against all that stuff, to sterilize them from any trace of the creation or community in which they exist. They are our fortresses. We build them just for us, we make them perfect just for us, and then we barricade ourselves inside them. We isolate ourselves from everything and everyone outside. And then, we are astonished, mystified, when we struggle to find sacredness in our lives, and are so surprised and refreshed when we drive three hours up the road, spend time camping or cottaging, and find that sacredness once more.

This link between the sacred and natural world is one that the First Nations of our country have always understood as central to their existence. We read about the housing crisis in Attawapiskat and everyone has the next great idea for the solution. I've read countless articles about what kind of housing would be best. Wood is no good, because it rots, or burns up. Shipping containers might work, but would anyone want to live in them? How do we deal with the problem of permafrost? And what we get, time and time again, are houses that are poorly-designed, poorly-built, and poorly cared for. And we are horrified at this poverty on our doorstep – but we have no idea what to do, how to make it better. This week, Ken interviewed a woman named Pam Palmater for the *United Church Observer*. Pam works as a lawyer for First Nations issues, and has served as head of Indian Affairs, along with many other credentials. The interview is really interesting – I won't reveal the details, because it will be published in the January issue. But she did say something very interesting in the conversation, mainly that (I'm paraphrasing) the preoccupation with the material stuff of houses has never been the chief concern amongst First Nations peoples. When we agonize over housing materials, we're asking all the wrong questions. What matters most is the land. The land is where we live, our respect for it and relationship to it is of the utmost importance. Control of the land – how it is used, how it is treated – is a far bigger concern than what sort of houses get built on it. Houses will come and houses will go, but the land is forever. Creation is forever.

I'm not suggesting we all need to leave here today and go build chicken coops in our backyards, or sell our houses to live in tents. But the stable reminds us of what we seem to have forgotten – that creation and holiness are inseparably bonded. So this Christmas, as we sing carols and gaze at crèches and trim our perfectly manicured Christmas trees, perhaps it would serve us well to remember that our Messiah took his first breath on earth beside the cows and sheep – right in the heart of all creation's messiness. And as we search for sacredness, the way we always do this time of year – we might do better venture outside our cedar palaces, outside our dream homes – and just go out walking.