



race Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

GOD IS ON THE MOVE

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 21, 2014

Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-3

Sermon text: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. 2 Samuel 7:2-5

“They say Aslan is on the move.” With these words, the character of Aslan, the great lion and rightful king of Narnia, is introduced in the C. S. Lewis’ enduringly popular Christian allegory, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Somehow just hearing these words stirs feelings among the children who hear them, different feeling of excitement, fear and hope. They do not know anything yet about Aslan, yet the news that he is on the move is strangely thrilling.

God is on the move, and so must God’s people be. As Christians, and even as Jews, we ought to know this. I say even as Jews, for Israel, the church’s older sister in faith, learned the hard way that even though the LORD sanctioned the construction of a great temple under the great king Solomon, it was only on condition that justice and true worship continue. When idolatry and injustice overthrew the righteous Torah, then the Temple itself, the place where God allowed God’s name to dwell, was not immune, and Jerusalem not protected from the pillage and destruction of invasion. The Babylonians ransacked the city and destroyed the Temple in 586 BCE. Again in the common era, the Romans tore the Second Temple down after the insurrection of Bar Kochba in the year 70, some 47 years after the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.

In our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning, we hear of an earlier time, when King David, father of Solomon, thought of building God a permanent house. “Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the

LORD is with you.”

But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle.” (2 Samuel 7:1-6)

God goes on to question David: have I ever complained about this? Have I ever asked for more than a tent or tabernacle? No. So don't worry about a temple. I'm good moving around. Just keep on doing what I have called you to do: establish the kingdom, make it safe from its enemies, and rule with justice and mercy.

God is on the move, and so must God's people be. There is no place immune to the forces of change and conflict, no point of permanent equilibrium, no temple on earth in which God dwells year after year, aeon after aeon. The pyramids get covered in sand and flood. The Temple is torn down, stone upon stone; there is no church or mosque any greater or safer; all are built on foundations of sand, and must be rebuilt always by people who have living faith. When living faith is gone, and God has left the building, a church becomes either a museum or a ruin or a condominium. God has moved on. And so must God's people.

The Church is sometimes called the pilgrim people of God. This is our name as a daughter and sister in faith of Israel. (We are called the body of Christ when looking at our being and purpose in a different way.) As a pilgrim people we understand that nothing on earth is permanent, that this earth is itself in process of change, of continual creation destruction and recreation. We are called to travel lightly, care for the earth and the communities we pass through, for we are all on this journey together.

Isn't it remarkable that in our Christian story, God comes to us as a newborn child, born of poor pilgrim parents? Mary and Joseph find no room at the inn but must shelter in the stable, with the ox and the cows. The shepherds—nomads for a living—are the first ones to notice. The people in the homes and taverns are too busy. They're fixed in front of the TV. They haven't heard the news carried in the wind. Only a few wise ones living in the desert or on a mountaintop pick up the signal. But we have the gospel now. We have the good news. Let us then be on our way to Bethlehem, to see the newborn king.

God came to us as a child, and grew in a home in a small village, only to leave it as a man and wander, town to town, preaching and healing. He ended up, as all prophets do, in Jerusalem, at the great Temple. He knocked over the order of business, overturned the moneychangers, and prophesied that when the Temple falls—and it will not be long—he would rebuild it in three days.

What could he have meant? The Temple has yet to be rebuilt (though some extremist Jews would like to tear down the mosque on Temple Mount and try.) Jesus meant, of course, that he himself was and is the Temple, that it is his body that was broken and died and was buried, but he rose again on the third

day.

But then, where is his body? After forty days, according to Luke, he ascended into heaven—into an eternal habitation not made with human hands—a place everywhere and nowhere (heaven is where God dwells and so is the spiritual dimension of existence, not found on any map or confined within the dimensions of the material universe). And yet though heaven seems the epitome of the unchanging, it is not. For the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and is sent by the Son to move our world—all life is given through it—and in a special way, the heart and mind of the person of faith. As people of faith we are like the children who hear that Aslan is on the move. We hear that God is on the move, Christ is risen, and our hearts respond, our feelings as well as their thoughts are engaged.

To be a person of faith is not to have all the answers. It is not to have what is sometimes called an unshakeable faith. It is not to be free from doubts and skepticism. To be person of faith is to have that feeling, that longing that there is more to this life than philosophy dreams of. There is truth, beauty and purpose that can only come from a creator who also calls this creation to an end and a purpose. I am not sure what that end and purpose are, exactly. But we will find out. We have been sent a messiah, Jesus Christ, and a Way to follow. We are called to end our old way of life and begin again, and again, to turn and turn again, to fall and get back up, to hope and to love. This is our faith.

Our faith is in God and Christ not church, not a building, a denomination, a history, a liturgy, no matter how beautiful and meaningful. Jesus started a movement, not an institution. I love the church, I am part of the institution. But the church only exists to serve the mission of God, the institution only exists to support the practices and teaching of faith. When we serve the people who are not in the walls, then we fulfill our purpose. We are called and commissioned to bring light to a dark world, hope where there is despair and a sense of meaninglessness. Our Lord and Savior is coming again, and again. We will celebrate this on Christmas, the Feast of the Nativity. Christ our Savior is born. God is on the move. Let us be on the move too.

In the name of Christ, amen.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector
Grace Church, Millbrook, NY