
The Holy Humor of Housing the Homeless God

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A sermon by the Rev. Thee Smith, Priest Assoc.

In the name of God, our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend! Amen.

Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD:

Are you the one to build me a house to live in?

”2 Samuel 7:5

We heard that scripture for today read a few minutes ago. It was read appropriately, I acknowledge; credibly, and effectively”thank you, lector. Now we've heard a *lot* of scripture read in this place, haven't we? But however much scripture we hear or however much we read the Bible throughout our lives, we can all agree on one thing: not a lot of laughter accompanies the reading of scripture!

Several days ago in our St. Mary's Chapel we celebrated the feast day of St. Ambrose. Ambrose was the Bishop of Milan in fourth century Italy, and was canonized as a saint for many things. But his fame for us includes the fact that he mentored another famous saint, Augustine, who was bishop of Hippo in Roman North Africa. A notable feature of that mentorship was that Augustine often got the opportunity to observe Ambrose reading”reading scripture among other texts.

That would not be noteworthy except for the fact that Ambrose read silently, without vocalizing or sounding the words out loud. And again: that would not be noteworthy except for the fact that it was so unusual in the ancient world that Augustine commented on it his classic text, *The Confessions*. He described it as something that astonished him about his mentor; it distinguished Ambrose among the people of his day. [Alberto Manguel, Ch. 2 of *A History of Reading* (NY: Viking, 1966), "The

Silent Readers," http://www.stanford.edu/class/history34q/readings/Manguel/Silent_Readers.html]

Augustine has made famous the figure of his mentor bent over a text and reading intently without moving his lips; the image is almost an icon in its own right. But nowhere do we have a comparable icon of Bible readers laughing with the reading of scripture. It's a notable absence in our tradition that I'm calling to our attention right now. If you know of or discover any such depiction, please tell me!

I think it's worth taking time to notice this because in our Old Testament reading for today we have a rare opportunity to read scripture with a "'preferential option for holy laughter,' or at least a smile. Today's scriptures, appointed for this Fourth Sunday in Advent, allow us a much needed opportunity to take that option.

Certainly the option to prefer laughter is not a requirement for reading scripture. In some circles however it may be regarded as a sign of Christian piety. It's the kind of piety that we may borrow from our Jewish brothers and sisters in faith, and you can hear it in that Yiddish proverb popularized by Woody Allen. It goes like this: "'If you want to make God laugh, tell God your plans.'

Similarly, here's how the verse I first quoted would sound with a characteristic Jewish wit, and in a humorous tone of voice; not too much ridicule as in the Book of Job, but with just enough irony to raise a smile:

Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build *me* a house to live in?

And then let's play with the tone, or "'ham it up' a little.

Boy, are you trying to tell me you gonna build *me* a house? You from the country, and I took you out of the country and made you a kingpin, and now you say you gonna build *me* a palace?

I don't know what's funnier: you building me a house or me actually living in one of your Lebanese cedar homes. I ain't lived in a house since "'back in the day' when I brought you people out of Egypt. I "'been' moving around all y'all's' tents, and hanging around that tabernacle like one of your nomads. And now you want to put me in a house, as if that's a better arrangement!

Now you listen to me. I've got a better plan. I'm gonna make you into a house. That's right, king of Israel. I'm gonna create a housing project that

will have your dynasty endure forever. It's gonna take a few centuries, but never mind that. You've waited a long time; you can wait longer. Because I'm gonna make sure the foundation of this house will be firm; you can be sure of that!

Oh well, so much for humor combined with piety. I'm not sure it works. And I gotta' admit we have "way more' hilarious expressions of humor available to us than that. Especially when it comes to housing issues, or building a house, or home ownership matters, we can find a lot of material that's funnier. Providentially, today's scriptures give us a pious opportunity to enjoy some of that wit.

For example, one real estate agent was overheard saying to a couple who were first-time house buyers:

"Why don't you folks tell me what you can afford to buy. Then we'll all have a good laugh and go from there."

And here's one that might work even in a therapy session:

If you think that no one cares whether or not you're dead or alive, just miss a couple of house payments.

But here's one I like in particular because it challenges my feelings of patriotism:

What a country! Where else can you borrow money for a down payment on a house, then get yourself a 1st mortgage""even a 2nd mortgage, and still call yourself a home-owner?

Oh well, back to piety: because piously speaking, God knows something about house-building that even kings don't know or that even kings can't manage. [That's why St. Paul's calls God "the only wise God" in today's reading from Romans (Rom. 16.27)] That's why the model for house building that we're given on this Fourth Sunday in Advent is not the model of King David building a house for God""a house of cedar" for "the ark of God" (2 Samuel 7:2,7). No: the fulfillment of today's prophetic scripture is not even the great Temple of Solomon that was finally completed by David's son and successor; the fabulous temple that was still standing in Jesus' day, and that the Romans destroyed forever in the year 90 C.E.

Rather, the model of piety before us today is that of a young woman who offers

herself, her own soul and body, as the best and most sufficient offering any of us can make to house the living God.

"Our souls are restless until they rest in thee.' That's the classic theological passion declared centuries ago by St. Augustine. And on this Fourth Sunday in Advent we get to appreciate an unlikely converse of that passion: "God wanders homeless in the world until God rests in you and in me.'

And here's the irony, if not the hilarity: that the God of the universe condescends to inhabit human hearts. The irony is that God's most desirable dwelling place""in, through, and beyond the dynastic tradition of King David and the messianic prophets""is ""ourselves, our souls and bodies' ["Holy Eucharist I," *Book of Common Prayer*, p.336; www.bcponline.org] And here is how St. Paul declares it in Romans today; the declaration, as he says""

according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages, but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the living God, to bring about the obedience of faith . . .

Yes: here is the ""obedience of faith;' that we, Christian friends, that we would commit ourselves to be a fit habitation for God, as the Blessed Virgin Mary does during the angel's visitation in today's gospel reading; that we too say to God, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

And so we pray once again our Collect appointed for this fourth Sunday in Advent. Please find it there, will you, in your service booklet or on the front of your scripture insert. Let us pray together this collective prayer, from the Book of Common Prayer, that prepares us every year in this transitional week; this hinge week between Advent and the feast of the Incarnation, the great festival of Christmas.

The Lord be with you . . .

Let us pray . . .

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.



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