**SERMON 2 Sam 7:1-11,16 & Luke 1:18-38**

PRAYER

As we prepare ourselves to hear God’s Word on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, would you pray with me:

Lord God, you know us completely, and in our imperfections, we recognize your perfection. Within our limitations, we recognize your limitlessness. In our failure to love, we rely wholly on you, the One called Love. So now, we pray to be receptive to all you have for us. Expand our visions and give us courage walk in Your Way of love. **Amen.**

STORY

There are stories that my family tells over and over again, but they resurfaced particularly when my grandfather was failing physically and coming to the end of his life…back about 15 years ago. They were stories about his farming days, about him running after cattle, driving plough-horses and slinging bales of hay high into the cart. They were stories about him riding his motorcycle top speed across the uneven roads over the bog to the Methodist meeting house where he occasionally preached.

They were of sermons he delivered on beaches and in fields, while wind and waves were howling, but his voice carried over the weather anyway. Stories about learning to drive a car in his sixties and how he shouted at his 4 brothers. And how, although he was visibly growing smaller in the present, how his voice remained strong. Although his appetite faded, he still wanted you to pile his plate high with potato, meat and veg…with plenty of butter and salt on the side. And although his memory faded, bible verses (in the King James) and the words to “How Great Thou Art” still came to his mind with crystal-clear clarity.

TRANSITION

Old stories are powerful aren’t they. And good stories often encompass a whole range of experiences, emotions and circumstances. They can be instructive, offering advice and guidance in our present time. They can be reminders of things often forgotten, about who we are and where we’ve been. They can often bring comfort and laughter, even as we grieve those who have since passed. And they can open up alternative perspectives and inspire creative responses to our current context.

Since moving to the United States over 12 years ago stories about my grandparents have often come to my mind. They remind me that I come from a people with loud voices, big appetites, and strong arms, from an impatient people who drive too fast, and have rough hands and short tempers. There is deep meaning and value in telling and re-telling the stories found not just our families of origin, but also in our families of faith.

I’m grateful, especially at this time of year, that stories we read in scripture aren’t necessarily God’s words about a holy people, but rather people’s words about a holy God. And in and through these very human accounts of searching for, and forgetting and then returning to God, we find ourselves, again and again and again.

And here we are, on the final Sunday of Advent, and our 4 weeks of preparation for the coming of Christ and our lectionary passages today, present to us the stories of David and Nathan from Second Samuel, and of Mary and Gabriel from the gospel of Luke. And like all good stories I believe that they have the power to resonant with you a-new today, opening up alternative perspectives and inspire creative responses to our current context.

OT TEXT (1)

In Second Samuel chapter 7, we read about David’s aspirations to build house for God. And before consulting God about the king’s plans, the prophet Nathan, says “Sure.” I mean everything up until this point seems to suggest that everything David touches turns to gold. His kingship, after all, is the culmination of God’s promise made to Abram back in Genesis 12. And this sounds on the face of it like a great idea, David wanted to build something that was worthy of God’s presence, something that looked powerful, communicated divine protection and divine favor.

But that night, God delivered a message to Nathan for David…a reminder that in their relationship with God. God is principally the provider rather than the recipient: God has brought David to this place, and rather than David building a “house” for God, God will build a “house” of him. *Now*, isn’t it remarkable that even King David, God’s appointed king, the progenitor of a lineage that would bring forth Jesus, needed to be reminded that God’s presence cannot be contained by temple, tent or tabernacle.

OUR TIME

And isn’t it remarkable still, that we in 2020, with all the advantage of the full canon of scripture, also need the reminder that God’s presence cannot be contained in any one building. No matter how precious that physical space may be. God simply cannot be contained. God’s uncontainable presence moves and infuses all things.

David needed to re-hear the stories of his own ancient past. Of how the LORD would go “in front of [the Hebrew people] in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and a pillar of fire by night, to give them light” (Exo 13:21). That after “the LORD drove the sea back” (Exo 14:21b-22), that this same God would provide bread from heaven (Exo 16) and water from a rock (Exo 17:1-7). David needed to be reminded that God’s uncontainable presence was *with* his ancestors, working faithfully and graciously despite human unfaithfulness and failures. The God of the Israelites is a God that moves with the people. The God of David is a God that continues to move and does so in and through human history.

I wonder, in light of this story and this reminder where you might be encountering God’s presence *out in the wild* these days when we cannot safely meet together in this place? I wonder how God’s uncontainable power might be displayed in your home, in your Zoom meetings, in your place of work, and in your time in nature? God’s uncontainable presence moves and infuses all things…and yet, even kings in a reminder.

OT TEXT (2)

And that is not the only surprise that this text has for us today. This account of David and Nathan likely did not come together at a time when “the king was settled in his palace and the Lord had given him rest from all the surrounding enemies” (2 Sam 7:1). Instead, it came together during the Babylonian captivity. Where there was no rest, no palace, and no king. The land was devastated, and the people were living in exile in a foreign land, and under brutal oppression. Six hundred years of self-rule came to an end in the space of two years.

The trauma of exile shattered Judah. It challenged and changed its political, social, and religious ways of being. Key elements of religious, social, and cultural life collapsed. This was a time of numerous questions about *where* God was? Many people believed that perhaps God had somehow failed them or turned away from them. Some even questioned God’s existence.

Yet alongside such despair, others hoped and worked for renewal and a better future. They reshaped worship practices, focusing less on the now-destroyed temple (the one that was built during Solomon reign) and more on observing the Sabbath and other holy days.

Still others, attempting to understand and find meaning for the destruction and exile, delved into the past. And they called up old stories and traditions. Stories that reminded them that even King David needed to be reminded that God’s presence cannot be contained by temple, tent or tabernacle. God’s presence moves with the people, infuses all things…and that opened up the possibility that God’s presence was still with them even while they suffered in exile.

OUR TIME

2020 has been truly traumatic for many. Evictions, joblessness, and deaths only scrap the surface of the emotion-whiplash we’ve collectively and repeatedly experienced. It’d true, our religious practices have been completely turned on their heads, our social lives have contracted as we’ve had to cancel family gatherings and meals with friends in favor of more virtual connection, and our cultural life, participation in arts, music and sporting events have all been altered over these past 8 months.

And so I wonder how you are experiencing this moment? How are you holding peace alongside the tension of our moment? How are you working for hope while injustice continues to be perpetuated from our highest office? How are you making room for joy, even amidst the pain and grief of loss? And this, the fourth week of Advent, how are you loving…even when your frustrated and scared about the future? As we approach the final days before Christmas, I want you to know that our God who cannot be contained but moves into the places in our own hearts that are hiding the most pain, that God can hold it all.

NT TEXT

This is a truth that the young, unwed Mary knew. These old stories, of Exodus and wandering, of Judges and Kings, of exile and return were known to even her. She knew about the uncontainable God of her ancestors. And so, when she was visited by a messenger from God, we know that despite her young age and inexperience that she understands that her God is a God on the move. A God that holds all the experiences of humanity together; peace and pain…together, hope and fear…together, joy and sorrow…together, and above all LOVE.

Mary’s God is one that was known to do unexpected things at unexpected times. She had heard stories about God’s continued faithfulness towards an unfaithful people, of God is power when those people were powerless. Mary, if you continue to read the verses following our passage today, is clearly a young women of faith, who knows that God is not captive to human expectations, but who, not once upon a time, but time and time again – scatters “the proud in the thoughts of their hearts,” brings “down the powerful from their thrones,” lifts “up the lowly,” and fills “the hungry with good things,” and sends “the rich away empty” (Luke 1:52-53). This young woman of faith, though scared and unsure about many things, could say through her fear and uncertainty, when assured that “nothing is impossible with God” (Luke 1:37), “Here… I… am” (Luke 1:38).

OUR TIME

Friends, I am weary, as I know you are, with news of rising cases, uncertainty about work and school, of cancelled plans and delays gathering. I’m emotionally exhausted, as I know you are, of not being able to see family, hug grandparents, visit with friends and have folks over to our houses.

But I wonder, in light of Mary’s story, how you might say, “Here I am” this day. For her story, just like David’s before her, like all good stories open us up to alternative perspectives and creative responses to our current context. I wonder whether our stories today could remind us that that even though we feel contained because of coronavirus, God remains *un*containable, *un*restricted, *un*deterred, and *un*stoppable. Continuing to move with the people, even so far as to take on flesh.

CONCLUSION

This week, as you light the fourth candle in your Advent wreath at home, I invite you to reflect on the love that the God of our ancestors continues to bring into your life. As weird and as hard as things might be for you at the moment. Allow the old stories of our faith reminder you of who you are, and whose you are. We are a people of a God whom we declare every week, is “still-speaking,” and is still moving, even in 2020. May you encounter God’s presence today, wherever you are. **Amen.**