

TEXTS: Psalm 84; 2 Samuel 7:1-13

Beware of the Edifice Complex

We learn it a very early age – here, I’ll show you. If I say “I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down” – which house do you want to be in? The brick house, of course – solid and strong enough to withstand the force of whatever wolves can blow our way. We learn it at church as young people, with song and sounds to remind us that when the rains came tumbling down, it was a good thing that the “wise man built his house upon the _____”. And, like the children today, perhaps we were shown what the church is – walls, doors, steeple = church.

Many years ago, my husband was in Providence Rhode Island, and was out for a morning run. As he ran past a church, a very grand brick structure, with a domed roof and white pillars, it was the sign out front that stopped him in his tracks. It simply said “Beneficent Congregational Church meets here”. Not fancy theology, not catchy phrasing – but a powerful message. Because how easily we forget. How easily we say “I’m going to church” or “What’s happening at the church this week”. How distracted we can get by the needs and trappings of that understanding of church – the brick house. If we just modernize the sanctuary, people will come. If we don’t renovate those bathrooms, no one will come. It is a slippery slope.

And maybe God knew that, and saw it coming all those centuries ago. David’s path to kingship had hardly been easy – obstacles (like there already was a king), drama and death threats, battles on every front. But he made it. Our text begins with these words: “After the king was settled in his palace”. Settled in – it had to feel good, although it was an illusion, of course, as it always is. But David, aware of God’s mighty hand, clearing the path to the palace

for him, was grateful, and even humble enough to think it just wasn't right for him to be in a palace, and God to still be in a tent. A fancy tent, mind you – I mean the Ark of the Covenant didn't come from Cabellas or LL Bean. With the best of intentions, David sought to honor God by building God a house. It seemed like a good idea at the time – even the prophet Nathan gave it a nod. But then God spoke to Nathan – and said no. Not now. Not yet. Not you.

God's "no" came with reminders – for David and for those of us today worshiping God in brick houses. God reminded David that God is a God on the move. That the God who traveled with the people out of Egypt, through the sea, through the wilderness, through the changes and challenges and conflicts was the God who could be with them where they were. It was like the way David himself had been a shepherd, moving with the flock to meet their needs.

God knows there are pitfalls with permanent structures. One is that it allows us to buy into the myth that things will now settle in, will now settle down, will no longer change or lead us elsewhere. The king had settled into the palace, now God could settle in, too and all would be, well, settled down. The truth is, of course, that life, that things, do continue to move on, to change, to be unsettled and unsettling at times. Change - It happens everywhere else – and yet, the church struggles with and against it. Beware of the edifice complex – remember that life moves, moves on, and that God moves with us.

A second pitfall of the permanent structure is that we begin to think that we have housed God. When we have a designated place, it can lessen our expectation of finding God elsewhere. When we call it "God's house" we assume this is where God lives – as opposed to anywhere, everywhere else. Without intending to, we box God in to a place, and even a day. We then have Sunday and the rest of the week, our church life and the rest of our lives. And

while that surely does not limit God's presence – it surely can limit our experience of it. Beware of the edifice complex - God is not housed or limited. Recognize the temptation a “house of God” brings – and intentionally seek God beyond these walls.

A third pitfall of the permanent structure is the connection and possible constraints by those who built it. If David the King built the Temple, would it become an arm of the king's policies? In the hands of human nature, we know this is possible --- the Protestant Reformation sought to expose this collusion in the 16th century. The ever ongoing debates about separation of church and state in political rhetoric continue to speak to it. Churches cannot help but reflect the culture that built it. But then the culture shifts – as we are well experiencing now. And a church that is too permanent, too structured in spirit, doesn't have enough shift in it. Also, there's the investment by those who built a church, or have worked hard to maintain the building – and you know what that can be. That investment in a structure comes with the pitfall of perceived ownership, or the reluctance to change for fear of offending. Beware the edifice complex – the way a permanent structure can make us beholden – to a cultural expectation or to individuals invested in it.

Ask yourselves a question – and listen for how it makes you feel. What if this brick house were no longer here? What would happen? What would you do? Would the church be gone? Do any of you remember back in 1993 when West Presbyterian Church burned to the ground? It was a huge brick house of God, once the largest congregation in the Presbytery. The structure dwarfed the dwindling congregation, limiting their possibilities. After the fire, the church (which was not the building) met at the YMCA for 4 years. They took their time to make a careful, prayerful decision – not just to get their church back, not just to replace what they had, but to

revision what was called for now. They made many changes to suit the new realities they faced. They built a new brick structure where the church met for 15 more years. It now houses Connections Community Service programs, as the people who were West Church have gone on to be the church elsewhere. How would you feel, what would you do, what would it mean if this permanent structure were not here? Who and how would church be lived out?

In the meantime, here we are. In a brick house. You are Church of the Covenant that meets here. You did not come to church today. You are the church, every day. When God spoke to Nathan about King David's desire to build God a house, God didn't just say no period. God said not now. Not yet. Not you. It wasn't the right time. It wasn't the right ministry for the moment. He wasn't the one called to do it. We know that in just one more generation, with David's son Solomon, the Temple would be built, in all its glory and with all of its pitfalls. But for now King David, it is not yours to build. It is not about what you want, not about your vision, not about what you even with the best intentions seek to build --- but it is instead about what God intends to build in you. Church of the Covenant that meets here, listen to that --- and hear not just that God can say no – but that God offers promise. It is possible that God may say no to what you hope, or work for, or pray for or seek to make happen or build here. But God is also seeking to build something in you. Listen and seek that kind of building.

One last image to leave with you. I was at a meeting this week about building a new faith community in Middletown, using an existing church building where the congregation can no longer live out a viable ministry. They finally heard God's no and accepted it, and heard too that there might be a new and different thing God would seek to build if they would let go. At this meeting, our Executive Presbyter Jim Moseley told us about his house, in which there is a

small woodstove. For years, Jim has gathered sticks from along the Brandywine, laid them in the stove and lit a fire that brought warmth to his house. This past winter, he did as he'd always done. And the fire went out, smoke backing up, filling the house. He checked the flue, tried again. Same result. He added more paper, tried again. Same result. Finally, he ended up calling a chimney sweep. He checked the wood stove thoroughly, tried lighting a fire himself. The fire went out, smoke backing up, filling the house. The two men just sat on the floor, bewildered. Finally the chimney sweep asked "What's changed?" "Nothing", Jim said. "I do this the same way – have for years. Nothing's changed." "Something's changed. Any work done elsewhere on the house?" "Well, we had 2 windows replaced on the 3rd floor". "Go up and crack those windows for me." With that, the fire took and the smoke vented up through the pipe. The chimney sweep wasn't surprised. "I see this all the time now – buildings are made so tight and secure that they can no longer breathe. The outside needs to get in. My job used to just be to go around cleaning out chimneys. Now my job is putting holes in brand new houses."

Beware the edifice complex – the pitfalls of permanent structures. Buildings need to breathe. Buildings where churches meet need openness to the Spirit, in here and out there. The Spirit that can blow change, or light a fire under you. Be open to what God seeks to build in you- even if it comes with a no to what you wanted or expected to be building yourself.

I don't mean to be sending mixed messages with our next hymn "Let Us Build A House". Here is the note that accompanies the hymn. "Although it was written for a church dedication, this text is not about a physical structure, but a spiritual one. The building is at best only a vessel for the essential love and hope, life and faith, peace and justice, hospitality and nurture that form the worshiping community." So let's sing it --- and let's be it.