

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Cycle B

2Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 4a, 16 & Luke 1:26-38

I have been enjoying the PBS show, "Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates Jr." (Yes, yes, I am about eight years behind the times; somebody has to be on the back end of the bell curve.) The show traces the genealogies of famous people. Surprising disparities always arise between the person today and ancestors discovered in their family tree. The modern people light up emotionally – with delight, pride, sorrow or compassion – as they become aware of their past. Usually, they had never thought much about their roots. I wonder whether their ancestors thought much about them. Did the enslaved person run away or the persecuted peasant book passage to America with an eye to future generations?

By and large, our culture does not value history nor concern itself with the future. E.g. We have been engrossed in the pandemic, our suffering and restrictions. We seem to have forgotten that we have survived tough times before and that our ancestors have survived even worse. We do not think beyond life returning to normal. What we would like to do differently? Have we used our lock-down time to plan ways to reduce poverty, lack of internet access, disparities in health care or inadequate education? Is there more to us than our immediate pleasures or discomforts?

God invited King David to consider more than the present, even though David's present was sweet. He had just finished uniting the tribes of Israel into one nation, defeating the Philistines, being crowned king and setting up a capital in Jerusalem. He and the people were transitioning to a settled lifestyle; maybe God should settle too. Ever since the Exodus, God had traveled with the nomadic tribes and resided in a tent just as they did. In 2Sm 6, the ark of the covenant, which represented God's presence, had been placed with Obed-edom, whose household was then blessed with divine favor. David, wanting that divine favor for himself, moved the ark to Jerusalem and announced he would build a permanent place for God to reside, a temple. Perhaps David, a wily strategist, hoped that if God lived in a temple in David's capital city, God's favor would reside with him. He presented the idea reverently: "Here I am living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God dwells in a tent."

God replied, "I will reside in Jerusalem on my terms because that has been my plan all along." God outlined (in verses we don't read) how God had been leading up to this point since the Exodus and then (in lines we do read) how God had lifted up David to power. God emphasized that the security God granted to David was also granted to the Israelites. God broadened the reach of this tremendous redemption, begun in the Exodus, to future generations by establishing a house for David, i.e. a dynasty.

The real surprise, however, is what God meant by saying, "I will raise up an heir after you... and I will make his kingdom firm. I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me." One thousand years later, Gabriel announced the birth of Jesus, through divine power. He would be "Son of the Most High" and "of his kingdom there will be no end." Like David, we plant seeds and others enjoy the fruit. We are part of larger stories in which we are links in the chain of events that move toward the fullness of life in God. Imagine Mary, 13, uneducated, poor and invited into this grand story. God has given us in Mary a model for discipleship. While there is an element of passivity to accepting her role and the pregnancy, Mary must nurture the child within; she grows in love for this unknown person as the months pass. She endures the hardships of her pregnancy and the birthing. Then she must let this new person grow beyond her. We too must accept our roles, add our labor and love and let God grow in our world.

When told of God's goodness for her cousin Elizabeth, Mary was able to agree to God's plan. We too have proof of God's goodness. Through God's mercy, our spiritual ancestors lived through suffering to new life. Through God's mercy, our physical ancestors overcame hardship to build better lives for their children. Through God's mercy, we can make it through these unusual holidays. And through God's mercy, we can create a better world in which all our grandchildren flourish.

- ❖ What is your favorite story of God's support from the Bible, your family history or your own life?
- ❖ Discuss with God in prayer the future God wants you to build.