

Sunday, December 21, 2014: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38

by [Wes D. Avram](#) in the [December 10, 2014](#) issue

I love buildings, especially beautiful places of worship. I also think there's power in a cinder-block square with a tin roof or the circle of a campfire, if they're filled by songs and prayer. I used to serve a campus ministry that owned two houses. Both were in disrepair. We talked a lot, sometimes emotionally, about what to do. Borrowing the image of God's tabernacling presence with wandering Hebrews, a new pastor made a good case for no buildings and for creating a ministry of roaming presence. Others spoke of the value of *home*, of creating an inviting physical space of ministry.

I'm taken back to that discussion by the resonance of God's word to Nathan and Gabriel's word to Mary. I think this holds a tension that's at the heart of biblical faith. Nathan gives a word in response to David's plan to build a house for God. Gabriel tells Mary that her womb will become a home for the one who will fulfill the divine word given to Nathan so long before.

Political intrigues aside, at face value David is trying to honor God as he and his people settle into a time of growing national identity. They've carried the marker of God among them in a tent while David has been built a house of cedar. It seems unseemly; he must construct a house for the Lord, too. This David tells Nathan. Nathan does not object.

But that night, Nathan hears more. It sounds like God is almost embarrassed: *Through all we've been through together, have I ever asked for a house? In all the ways I've been faithful, have I ever required more than a tent as fragile and as movable as your security, and as close to you as the hope that carries you forward?* Then Nathan recites the promise that some say is the summit of the Hebrew Bible. God's presence is made sure not just in a project for that generation, but in a covenant with all generations forever.

The tension returns. It's OK to build buildings. The effort isn't quashed, at least not in the long term. And yet God's presence is assured not in the building, but in the promise.

How, then, is the promise met? Is it in the coming to be of what's promised—endless security, prosperity, honor, and peace? History seems to betray this God, even make this God a liar. Or is God's fidelity assured in the promising itself, in our experience of the creating God as a promising God? Is it in our mysterious ability to harness a power from beyond us to live in both freedom and hope? Is it in our sense that there's a promise at the heart of all creation, at the heart of our very being, at the center of what makes God's people God's? Is it in an intuition that is the promise of a saving, resolving, reconciling love, against evidence to the contrary?

During the years we were talking about buildings at that campus ministry, I read Georges Gusdorf's classic little book in phenomenology, *Speaking (La Parole)*. Gusdorf decides that the thing most distinctive, most persistent, and most defining in human language—compared to other forms of communication—is the making of promises. We betray ourselves when we betray a promise. We *become* ourselves, and so become human, when we make and fulfill loving commitments, forgive broken intentions, and see ourselves by virtue of the life-giving promises.

My teen years were in many ways shaped by word of this kind of promise from the pulpit, in the preaching of Timothy Hickey. Week after week I heard a simple affirmation at the heart of scripture. Hickey refused to define this affirmation any more than by exploring the creative tensions it generates. It occasionally bubbled up into words: that in the end, through it all, "God's final answer is always yes." It is the message of hope that makes the tensions of life creative.

It looks like delusion to cling to an expectation of something that the facts suggest will never happen. Yet there's a way of doing this, which we also call *faith*. We do our best to build the conditions needed to let the promise be realized, not because the responsibility is on us but because we believe the promise is real. We believe its realization is inevitable, even if beyond our view. To the eyes of faith, the delusion lies in losing that creative tension between our work and our hope.

We make a home in the world for the hope we find in the one promised. We make this home in order to remember—to let the promise be born among us, grow among us, and bring us a future if it will. We find faith in trusting that it will.

The answer, then, is in both the promise and the promising. It's in the words of Nathan to David, in the words of Gabriel received by Mary, in the life of Mary's child, and in our own work to make a home for this child and build his future. It's God's yes, which is our future too.