

Oct. 25, 2020 -- (Pentecost 22, God's Promise to David)

Sermon Text – 2 Samuel 7:1-17

- The king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." ...But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: "Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in?...Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." -

"If you see something, say something" – it's become a watchword for our time, though I'm not sure it always works out so good for those who follow it. The idea, it seems, is to reverse the trend of people not wanting to get involved in whatever may be happening around them. And it's not really too invasive. It's just making a report. "If you see something, say something." But these days whistleblowers are not always rewarded for their attentiveness. They are often vilified, chastised and disparaged for speaking up, their action seen as being disloyalty to the offended party or organization rather than as an attempt to correct a wrong or right an injustice. In other words, speaking up can get you in trouble. Nonetheless, vigilance is still the order of the day. "If you see something, say something."

David saw something that didn't seem right to him. After a long period of time, during which he had been constantly on the run, hiding out as a fugitive from Israel's first king, Saul, who wanted to kill him, he had finally been granted a time of peace, an opportunity to rest and a moment to establish the capital city of his kingdom at Jerusalem. The first thing he does is to build himself a palace made of fancy cedar wood imported from Lebanon, a gift from king Hiram of Tyre. And it was then, long after David, the young shepherd boy, had been anointed as king by the prophet Samuel, and long after he had killed the giant Goliath, and long after he had driven out the Philistines from the territory, that it says in 2 Sam. 5:12 that "David...perceived that the Lord had established him [as] king over Israel." Until then, I guess, it just didn't seem quite real. After all, Saul was still officially the king. He had never been deposed. David had been anointed as the future king, but he had never been enthroned. But once he builds himself a house, and finds himself able to live in a beautiful palace, then it starts to feel like it's really true. David is the king. The people have proclaimed him so. And his victories in battle have proven his ability to be their leader.

And all of that leads David to see that something is not right about this situation. He lives in a palace made of cedar, but the presence of God, symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant, which the people had brought with them from Egypt and which contained the stone tablets with the 10 Commandments inscribed upon them by God, was housed in a tent. There is a big difference between a palace and a tent. One is permanent, the other is temporary. One is substantial, the other is delicate. One is glorious, the other is humble. One is regal, the other is common. So, David sees something, and he says something. "See now," he tells his friend, Nathan the prophet, "I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Nathan sees it too, so he responds, "Go, do all you have in mind; for the Lord is with you." But that night, Nathan gets a word from the Lord. "You're wrong," says God, according to my summary of these verses, "David is not the one who will build me a house. That job will belong his son. And besides," says God, "I've been living in a tent for a long time now, going to and fro with my people as they traveled up from Egypt and made their way into this land of Israel, and I've never asked for anyone to build me a house. I'm good. But you can tell David this, 'I will make him a house. When he is finished being king, I will raise up one of his sons to rule in his place. He will build me a house, and I will establish his kingdom forever.'"

That is quite a promise. Someone from David's line will rule over God's people forever. When the nation goes out of existence and the last of its kings is hauled off into exile in Babylon, never to return, the people will surely wonder how exactly that promise is going to be fulfilled. We'll hear that story as we move along throughout this year, and I'll give you a hint, "It has something to do with a new king, whose birth is of great importance to us in the church, one which we take great pains to celebrate every year." But that's not really what I want to talk about today. Here's where I want us to focus. David sees something and he says something. But he doesn't stop there. He wants to do something. He wants to build God a house. And this is where he gets it wrong in his relationship with God. God doesn't want him to do something. God wants him to be something. And that's where I think we often go wrong in our relationship with God. Too often, we want to do something, when all God asks is that we be something.

Let me explain. This is Reformation Sunday. It is now the 503rd anniversary of the start of that movement in the church that gave rise to a renewed emphasis on the teaching of God's grace. That was central to Martin Luther's understanding of his faith. And it was central to his teaching in the church. God is a God of grace. God is a God of love. God is a God of mercy. If God were not, then God would demand justice from us. God would expect us to right all the wrongs. God would want us to

do something, when we see that things have gotten out of whack in our world. Let's go back to where we started our trip through the story of the Bible this year, in the Garden of Eden with the conversation between Eve and the serpent. When the serpent asks if there are any trees in the garden from which the people must not eat, Eve tells him they may eat of all the trees in the garden except the one in the middle because if they ate from that one they would die. The serpent tells her, "You will not die...God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Now remember, I told you then that this little bit was going to cause a lot of trouble. The ability to know the difference between good and evil sounds like a good thing. But it also gives us the power to make judgements, and judgements lead to divisions between those who do things right and those who do things wrong, and divisions lead to guilt over having failed at doing what was right and guilt leads us to want to do something to right the wrong that has already been done.

In David's case, it works like this. His ability to know the difference between good and evil leads him to judge that it isn't right for him to live in a fancy palace while God lives in a tent. This bad judgement upon himself leads him to feel badly about the situation and urges him on to want to do something to right the wrong by building an equally grand building to house the ark. Or let's put this in modern terms. Suppose we do something to break one of the commandments. Say we take the Lord's name in vain or forget to remember the sabbath or forget to honor our parents, or insult our neighbor (which is like murder) or are disloyal in our relationships (like adultery) or we cheat on a test or in our work life (which would be stealing) or we gossip and tell lies about one another (thereby bearing false witness) or we desire our neighbors things to the point that we begin to scheme how to get them (which is coveting). We know any of those things would be wrong. We feel guilty because we have sinned. We know we should be punished for our wrongdoing. And we want to make it up to God by doing something about it. What shall it be? How can we make it all right? That was Luther's dilemma. Knowing that he had sinned. How was he to appease an angry God? Well, it's complicated. If we could isolate our sinfulness to just one thing at one time, like David with his issue of appropriate housing, it would be easy. But our sinfulness is so convoluted and multifaceted that we can rarely sort it out to be just one thing. It's more like we live in a continual state of sinfulness. And that is hard to make up for by doing any one, or even very many, things.

But please notice. (And this is how this all ties together.) God didn't want David to do anything about God's lack of proper housing. No, God wanted to give him a gift. God wanted to make David a promise. God wanted to treat David with

compassion and with grace. God want to build for David a house, to make of his lineage a dynasty, to put his children and grandchildren on the throne and establish their kingdom forever. We can call that grace. God was gracious to David. God was willing to overlook his sin of living in a better house. God wants him to be forgiven. We can do that too with the long list of possible sins I gave you earlier as examples for all of us. God is well aware that we live in a state of sinfulness. God knows that we make judgements and feel guilt and deserve punishment. But God is willing to overlook all of that for the sake of Jesus Christ. God wants to give us a gift. God wants to treat us with mercy and compassion. God wants us to be forgiven. God wants us to receive God's grace. As Martin Luther struggled with his own dilemma, he came upon these verses in Paul's Letter to the Romans: "Now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed...through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..."

So, there you have it – you and king David – we're all in the same boat. Each of us has sinned. We all have something, or many things, wrong in our relationship with God. We can see it. And we can say something about it. We do that each week in our rite of confession and forgiveness. And, though we may want to take the solution upon ourselves and do something about it, God says "No," for we are "justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

Amen.