

St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Sermon for Dec. 22, 2019
2 Sam 7:1-16; Luke 1:26-38
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Holy Spirit, let these words be a cornerstone for our faith. Amen.

Christ Our Cornerstone

I don't know if any of you has much experience with writing sermons, but it's an interesting, and often challenging, weekly responsibility. I have never been one of those preachers who can conjure up an entire message on a Saturday night, nor have I mastered the art of preaching without notes. My preparation usually includes asking God what *God* wants to say to God's people, not what I want to say, so it was rather surprising, and a bit disconcerting, when I was out running errands while thinking about today's scripture passages, and this phrase popped in my head: "This is the house that Jack built."

Who remembers that nursery rhyme? I haven't thought of that rhyme since I read it to my children when they were little, eons ago, so why in the world did that one line suddenly appear like the star over Bethlehem? When I got home, I googled it, hoping to find the "Word of the Lord" somewhere in it. I was stumped because the story really doesn't have much to do with the house that Jack built or anything to do with God; instead, it's more about a feeding chain. It begins like this:

This is the house that Jack built.

This is the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the rat,
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the cat,
That killed the rat,
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.

A dog and cow follow, and then a man, tattered and torn, meets a maid who is forlorn, and lo and behold a priest, shaven and shorn, comes along and marries them, and somehow the rhyme goes back through the feeding chain to the house that Jack built. Not too helpful for sermon prep. But after a few minutes of pondering, I made what I hope was the connection and what God wants God's people, including me, to hear.

Our readings this morning are not, of course, about the house that Jack built, but about the house that God built, and that God is continuing to build through us. Christmas is when the cornerstone for the house was laid.

Every structure requires a foundation, right? That's why a house of cards can never stand. The foundation for the house that God built is Jesus Christ, and the name for him on this last Sunday in Advent is Cornerstone. We've reflected during this waiting season on the many names of Christ, including Messiah—the anointed one—The Light—which shines on in the darkness—Emmanuel—who is God with us—and now Cornerstone, a name found in ten different passages of scripture, including these:

The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. Psalm 118:22

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'"? Matt. 21:42

Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. And the cornerstone is Jesus Christ himself. Ephesians 2:20

So, what is a cornerstone? According to Wikipedia, "The *cornerstone* concept is derived from the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation, important since all other stones will be set in reference to this stone." Some synonyms include foundation, centerpiece, backbone, core, base, and heart. When we name Jesus Christ our Cornerstone, we are, then, also calling him our core, our heart, our very source of our being. Everything else we do in our lives is gauged in reference to this one stone.

The two stories pitted against each other this morning tell us something about building houses and using cornerstones. In the lesson from David, composed of a rather sharp dialogue between David's servant Nathan and God, we discover that David has decided he needs to build God as fine a structure to live in as David's cedar home. David seeks to take God out of the Ark of the Covenant, as if that is where God resides, and honor God by putting him in a grander box.

Let's think about that for a moment. David and God have had quite a relationship. David, who had been only a lowly shepherd, is now King of Israel by God's own choosing. As King, he thinks about God being in the Ark of the Covenant that is sitting under a tent and decides that a tent is not the proper place for God. We can't argue with that. Here we are, still rejoicing in the success of paying off a mortgage for a church building. And here is the danger, for David and for us.

We are in danger if the only place we ever think about our Cornerstone, Christ, is here in this building. We are in danger if we believe we can box Christ in or have a relationship

with him by meeting with him in a building once a week. We are in danger if we want to contain Christ in this safe, tidy, and pleasant place on Sunday mornings where we can admire him while keeping our distance. We are in danger if our relationship with Christ boils down to nothing more than coming here and minding our manners, reciting our prayers, sitting quietly, and forgetting most of what we heard by the time we get to the parking lot. We are in danger if after our Sunday worship we put the Cornerstone on a back shelf and fail to even think about him until the next time we come to the house and repeat the Sunday hour process. We are in danger of losing our centerpiece, backbone, core, and heart.

Those possible dangers are, I suspect, why Nathan got such an emotional and haughty lecture from God. God tells Nathan to go back to David and ask, “You are going to build me a temple? I don’t think so. When have I ever been contained? When have I ever even asked for a house while I moved among my people? I haven’t, because I am a God on the move.” What this God really wants isn’t a facility, but a *relationship*. If we believed that we’d meet Christ here, right now, wouldn’t we be a bit more excited? Or awestruck? Or expectant? Or joyful? Or, as Jesus liked to say, “Awake”?

So, then, what is this house that God, not David or Jack, promised when he said, “I declare to you that the Lord will make *you* a house”? I have a pastor friend who strongly believes that Jesus never intended for his church to be in buildings, which people often worship more than Christ, but that Jesus, like God, was always on the move, *taking church with him wherever he went* and inviting people all along the way to be in relationship with him, which is what real church is about. God promises David another kind of house, not a building made of cedar (or dry wall and brick) but a dynasty where the Messiah will be the cornerstone, the heart, of the house that God himself will build through David’s lineage: “He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”

God follows through on this promise in our second story where Luke tells us that Mary’s fiancé, Joseph, is “of the house of David” (Luke 1:27). Notice the difference in Mary’s response to God versus David’s. When Mary hears that she plays a crucial part in the house that God wants to build, that she has been chosen to birth this heart of the house, this cornerstone, she doesn’t try to control anything and she doesn’t plan anything. What she does is make herself available because her relationship with the Holy One is about believing and loving and providing space for. What Mary does, that David doesn’t, is to make room within herself for Christ to be born when she replies, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be done with me according to your word.” What Mary does, that David doesn’t, is share this Cornerstone with anyone who seeks it, not in a synagogue or church, but in a stable, on the road to Egypt, in the streets of Nazareth, and on a cross on a lonely hill. Mary must yield her own plans to make room for the house that God intends to build through her, making her an example of each of us.

These stories we've heard today are ancient, and if we approach them as nothing more than lessons in a Bible Study, we miss hearing the message that God wants each of us to hear. Maybe that message is a simple question: What kind of house is each one of us building, if Jesus Christ really is our Cornerstone? The extent to which we remember who this child about to be born actually is in our lives defines the relationship we have with him, no matter how beautiful our church buildings may be.

And God, perhaps, is also asking what kind of house each one of you is helping this particular congregation to build? Like Mary, are you relying on the Cornerstone to draft the plans and lead you in the future building with your new pastor? The answers depend on what Christ the Cornerstone really means to you, as his church.

In these last couple of days before Christmas, as we wait to celebrate the birth of the Cornerstone, may we remember that the house that God built continues to be built in us and by us. Christmas is when the cornerstone for the house was laid.

Thanks be to the Messiah, the Light, Emmanuel, and the Cornerstone.