

Faith Mennonite Church
December 21, 2008 – Advent 4
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“Perplexed and Pondering: Creating Room for the Holy One”
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38

How do we make room for the coming of Christ? How shall we receive him?

King David thought the best way to receive and honor God was to build a temple. God had called David when he was but a boy, had protected him from the mentally disturbed King Saul and from enemies in battle. And now, when David was finally at peace and securely on the throne in Jerusalem, he had built himself a fine home of cedar. It seemed like a logical next step that he should honor God with a similar, magnificent structure. At first blush, this sounded good to his spiritual advisor, the prophet Nathan, who gave his blessing to David: “do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.”

But given a bit of time to ponder and perhaps to dream that night, Nathan heard a different word from God: “I don’t need a home. I’m a God on the move, camping out in a tent and crossing borders. I’m a shepherd God who comes to people out in green pastures and by quiet streams. I throw parties and feasts out in the open, in the presence of enemies, not tucked away in an exclusive place. My kingdom is about *people* not sacred *spaces and places*. People who try to build a house for me will want to domesticate me, make me predictable. Building a house might require slave labor. And once I’m in a house, people will be tempted to worship the house, rather than the mystery.

Mennonites have historically taken these words to heart. Our spiritual forbearers referred to their gathering places as “meeting houses,” reserving the word “church” for the gathered community. Our Anabaptist cousins, the Amish, do not usually build separate worship spaces, but meet in homes or in barns. Of the four Mennonite churches and fellowships in the Twin Cities, we’re the only one that owns its own building—all the others rent space from another church. But most Mennonite congregations today *do* have their own church buildings. And many of us feel ambivalent now and then about how much money and time the upkeep, particularly of old buildings, requires. We don’t want our building to be the focal point of our church life. We don’t want to serve our building and lose sight of the hurts and needs around us.

As I look back on this past year, a year in which we have invested a great deal of money in our building, converting an antiquated heating system to an updated, more efficient one, repairing crumbling plaster and soon, we hope, spreading fresh paint, I wonder what the prophet Nathan would say to us. I think he would find our motives quite different from those of King David. I believe we have done this work, not in the spirit of appeasing or domesticating God, or ourselves, but actually in a spirit of opening ourselves to new places and activities God may call us to. Our desire is to create a place of greater welcome.

Just a week after the memorial service for Mike Schrock in March, a time when it would have been totally appropriate to seek safe haven and comfort for ourselves here, we proceeded with plans for a community forum and we opened our doors to a community discussion of our food system. And right about the time that a demolition crew began to carry out the old radiators and Bernie Weibl began boring holes in the basement walls for new duct work, the Church Council moved ahead with plans to advertise a new position for a ministry staff person, something we hadn’t done before, to lead us in building relationships in the community and to take our peacemaking witness beyond these walls and the walls of our homes.

How do we make room for the coming of Christ? How do we receive him? We make room by not letting our church building or our homes become shrines of escape or places of exclusive security. We encourage one another to follow the wild, roving, border-crossing God. We welcome each person

who enters here as a gift of God. We open the doors of our homes in fellowship, and as Minke and Joel recently did, to the stranger in desperation who knocks.

Mary provides another model for how we make room for the Divine. Many of us have a fairly inert image of Mary – a meek woman with down-turned eyes, in blue garb, with hands held in complacent submission. But Luke tells another story:

Mary's first reaction to her encounter with the divine messenger Gabriel is doubt. She is perplexed and wonders about the greeting. What perplexed her? What is she doubting? That she can be favored? She was probably unsure of herself...She was ordinary. So many other young women were prettier, more gifted than she...

Was she doubting that God was with her and that an angel was speaking to her? Her people had been waiting a *very long* time for the Messiah, religion had become a set of strict rules, and would God really bring news to a young woman who hadn't yet married, who didn't have the legitimacy of a husband?

Mary doubted; she was perplexed. But she didn't stop there. She quickly moved to pondering; she entered into conversation with the one about whom she had doubts. In Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, an old priest, hearing the confession of one who does not believe but must receive the sacrament in order to get married, says: "Doubt is natural to the weakness of mankind. [...] Even the holy fathers had doubts and prayed to God to strengthen their faith." With Mary and the old priest, we make room for Christ as we ponder the perplexing questions, letting our doubts draw us into conversation with God.

Mary was able to ponder and open herself to the divine message because she was a woman of connection. She was connected first of all to *history*. She knew the ancient story of her people, knew the promises, even if they sometimes seemed uncertain. She knew enough of her history so that, upon pondering, she realized that it wasn't so unusual for God to come to a simple woman. Moses the liberator and David the king had both been tending sheep, far from the centers of power, when they received God's call. Deborah, a woman, was called to be a judge. God had worked through unlikely men and women throughout the history of God's people; some were from the margins of the Hebrew community, some were foreigners.

Mary's other connection was to a community: Gabriel didn't bring news for her alone, but he also brought news of her cousin Elizabeth, who was also unexpectedly pregnant. Soon she would visit Elizabeth to share their joy and their surprising good fortune. It was in her meeting with Elizabeth, that she broke out into a song of praise that we call the Magnificat. My soul magnifies the Lord.

In these final four days of Advent, as we travel, spend time with family and friends, take part in long-held traditions and create new ones, as we gather around tables and at the hearth, let us ponder, turning our doubts into conversations with God. Let us find courage in our connections to the long history of God's people, even if we have only recently been adopted in. Let us find courage in and deepen our bonds within this community of faith that surrounds us here. Let us tell one another, as Mary and Elizabeth did, about the work, even the small perplexing movements, of God's Spirit in our lives.

And, let us remember that God doesn't ask for the perfectly decorated home or color-coordinated, ornate table. We don't have to be the Norman Rockwell painting or the Hallmark card. God, the Spirit who hovered over chaos at creation and slept as a babe in a manger, will camp out with us wherever we are and whatever circumstances we are in.

Emmanuel, God is with us. Let us, like Mary, welcome Christ within us.