

Sermon Archive 320

Sunday 29 November, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: 2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16
Luke 1: 26-38

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



St George's Presbyterian Church, Takapuna, now has a set of six or seven town houses. In my years there, they had one big old house in which I lived - a charming old thing with big windows and lead light glass in the hall. The kitchen was clearly a room that had been built onto the back of the house some years after the original house was built. There was an old, broken down chicken coop in the back garden. No chickens lived there by my time, of course, but I constantly resisted the parish plans to pull the coop down, because a wonderful old-fashioned grapevine was all grown through the failing woodwork on the North side. To remove the coop would have been to lose the grapes - and I was particularly keen to keep the grapes.

The house itself had a lovely feel to it, and good sun. It was a great place in which to live. One night, though, I was woken up by loud crashing, metallic scraping sounds coming from the ensuite bathroom. The sound was alarming - as is *any* sound in a house when you know it's the middle of the night and you're meant to be living alone.

Reluctant to investigate, but nevertheless knowing there was no one else to investigate, I grabbed one of the golf clubs from the objet-d'arte golf bag in the corner of the bedroom, shouted out "hello, who's there!" and tip-toed into the bathroom. When it's dark, and you're scared, generally a good thing to do is to turn on the bathroom light.

Turning on the light, though, is not such a good idea when the light has an extractor fan attached to it and the crashing, banging noise is being made by a possum who has fallen down the extractor fan vent.

Obviously, there was a crunching sound, and things then went very quiet. Some liquid came out of the extractor fan vent and formed a pool around the plug hole in the shower. Sure that I had a dead possum now in my extractor fan, and

that I was not going to be the one who died that night, I went back to bed. I resolved to give Murray a phone call in the morning. Murray was the convenor of the St George's Property Committee - responsible for maintenance of the house. Although I enjoyed the old-fashioned grapes in the garden, and kept them to myself, rather than shared them with Murray, I was not keen at all to engage with the dead animal in the vent. It was one of those wonderful occasions to not own the house I lived in - and to have a Murray-buffer.

There's an interesting post-script to this story. Murray came around in the morning, unscrewed the fan cover. A large body fell down into the shower, got up and ran straight out the front door. Possum, one; fan, nil.

-ooOoo-

Next year, in all likelihood, I will move into my own home, a relatively recently acquired property in Papanui. If any furry creature falls into the bathroom extractor fan vent in Papanui next year, it will be *my* problem. There will be no Murray to help me. So that's inconvenient.

But lovely, rather than inconvenient, is that no landlord can sell the place out from underneath me. Lovely is that I can carry on being at home there after I retire. Lovely is that there's room in the garden for me to plant a grapevine. Lovely is that it won't just be the grapevine putting roots down - but maybe also me. Lovely will be that when people come for dinner, I will be able to say to them not "welcome to this house", but "welcome to my home". And it won't be just because my name is on the land title, but because I will have made a commitment to a place - a piece of land, a particular roof that shelters me - the unattached Murrays in the place. Other ministers who have moved into their own homes tell me that it *does* feel different - much more settled; and, as someone who's moved around quite a lot over the years, I'm looking forward to experiencing it - to nurturing a sense of Turangawaewae.

-ooOoo-

Here's a bit of social issue and politics! Many people younger than me, trying to get into the property market, are facing an up-hill struggle. Although interest rates are low, deposits are hard to assemble. Some people party to the general conversation are wanting now to talk about how to make things more secure for renters - like they are in Germany, where long-term rental agreements are available, and greater freedoms are offered to renters to

adapt the accommodation they live in. And while these are good things to consider in our kind of property market context, they do actually signal something of an admission by our collective community that we believe some people are never going to own a home. So, in that way, it's like some of us are actually letting go of long-held Kiwi expectations.

And then, beyond that, there are the large number of people in overcrowded houses, moldy houses, cars. This concerns us, because it's hard to flourish when you have no sense of home, or actual home. It's hard to form community connections that can feed you, and keep you, and centre you, when you're always having to move and be somewhere else. Home is important.

Again, I say: home is important.

-ooOoo-

Some millennia ago, the people of Israel had been through torrid times - conflict, military engagements, trying to establish themselves as a stable nation. It hadn't been easy - everything had been fluid - as things are in war. But now, so says the narrator, they've come into a time of stability. It's described as a time when the king had "settled into his house". And if the king is settling, then the people also are able to settle. At long last, they're in a position to live a life that's less fragile, less necessitating constant negotiation. And I imagine that the king and people are feeling OK about that. Now they can plant trees and grapevines, sow crops, live in more solid structures than tents. Let's be at home.

Maybe because he feels that the building of a temple might buttress this kind of growing sense of stability for the people, the king suggests to the prophet, Nathan, that a house should be built for God. If the people need encouragement to be settled, it could be great if their God also could signal being settled. And a large structure, made of heavy, permanent materials, in the heart of their forming city, has to be perfect. It makes good national-political, symbolic sense.

Well, except that Nathan the prophet goes to bed, but not to sleep. God's disturbing his thoughts about what the king has suggested. It's seeming to him that God is resisting the idea of claiming a physical space. God **doesn't** want a place. God doesn't want to **live** in a place. God wants to **live** in a **people**.

-ooOoo-

I went to a home blessing last Sunday. It was a good occasion. Affirmed on that occasion was that the new home, being blessed, would only be a physical structure, an ambivalent thing, unless it was used as a place of welcome - welcome for people. And here, we find God saying "I don't want a place; I want a people".

What gives us roots is partly a place - familiar room on the earth. What makes us settled is, in part, the physical shelter - a title in Papanui. But what really gives us roots, belonging, a deeper place, is the love and commitment of a people - God making a home in a people - Murray and the others we meet.

We have, this morning, heard another Bible reading - a strange story of a young woman feeling like she's being addressed by an angel, about God making a home among people, as a person. The profoundest expression of God being at home among people is knocking on her door.

With little fanfare, but with hope that it might address us, I say this: if God is to have a home among people, which long, old stories suggest God wants, then individual people (like Mary) are going to have to make room in their own lives, and in their own willingness to believe silly things, for angels and mystery. They're going to have to hear things that they don't understand, because the things are a wee bit too angelic, and yet to say "yes" to them. If we want to say "God has a home among us", then not only Mary needs to say "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." We need to say it with her.

-ooOoo-

In the olden days, Presbyterian congregations provided for their ministers by providing a house. A house - or a home? Did it come with Murray - a human being / person, and other human beings? God desires a people, a people who make room for angels.

It's all too weird for Mary and for us; but Mary says "yes", and we keep a moment of quiet.

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