

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS 4TH. SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B)
2 Samuel 7: 1-5, 8b-12, 14a,16 Romans 16: 25-27 Luke 1: 26-38

Dear Preachers:

As I travel preaching in parishes, I find myself in beautiful church buildings; some so new, you can still smell that “new” smell in the carpets and the pews.

Parishioners point with pride to what they have accomplished and so they should. But some tell stories from their parish’s past, perhaps about their former church with its clapboard siding and leaky roof. Others, the “old timers,” recall Sunday Mass in a home, a storefront or a Protestant chapel graciously shared with them. They tell about how cramped they were, how they had to “make do” and bear inconvenience. Of course they are proud of their new church building; but they wonder if they have lost their founding spirit. Some claim they have and miss the intimacy they once had in their earlier parish community.

Chalk some of that talk up to nostalgia; of course, things were better in the “good ole days,” or so we think. But today’s first reading from 2 Samuel, does seem to point to the dangers of religion becoming institutionalized and fixed in brick and mortar, stain glass and flower arrangements. When the Israelites traveled through the wilderness, God traveled with them and dwelt in their midst in the “meeting tent”. God wasn’t limited to one place made by human hands but moved in the hearts and faith of the people. But now Israel was going through a comfortable period of peace and prosperity with its enemies vanquished and king David ensconced in a comfortable palace. He had led his people from being a loose assembly of tribes to a politically stable nation. Now he wants to bring the ark of the covenant from its tent dwelling to a temple he considers suitable for God. He probably also hopes the elaborate temple he has in mind will show that the nation has arrived; that these are a people of some importance.

It seems to make sense, doesn’t it? But David needs to be reminded who’s in charge. God was the one who took the lowly shepherd boy David (“from the pasture and from the care of the flock”) and made him king of Israel. God, not David, was the reason for Israel’s success and God will be the one to give them peace and protection from their enemies. Since God was the reason for their past success, God, not David, will see to their future as well.

Our relationship with God is alive, flexible and growing. This kind of relationship

challenges us to see God moving with us through our lives and giving us opportunities for a growth in faith. Some people still worship the God they knew as children, a God frozen in the past and recalled with romantic images and spoken to with prayers that may no longer reflect current realities. David wants to build God a fixed dwelling, but God will have none of it. The true “house of God” is established by God (“...God will establish a house for you”) and moves with us through our lives and the lives of our descendants, helping us face the challenges the different stages of our lives present. God had a much better idea than David. David’s son Solomon would get to build the temple, but it would be destroyed, the people scattered and taken into exile. Away from their land and with their temple destroyed, they would have no need for a God fixed in some former place. What they needed was a traveling God who could accompany them in their travail to a foreign land and then lead them once again to freedom.

It’s a very human instinct, to want to build a temple for God. Of course, a believing community needs a place to worship, we are not the ancient Israelites traveling through the wilderness with a portable temple that can be set up and taken down as the community moves. But the reading does place a caution before us “temple builders.” When we build the temple, we will determine its dimension. We will image God in it; maybe even make God in our own image and likeness. (In our part of the world, God will look white and male, because that’s what the ones in charge of the design look like.) A comfortable community may also want to have an image of a comfortable looking God in its temple, one that does not look like it will upset the status quo. We will also build the walls; keeping some out and shielding ourselves from outside influences. We will build doors, locate the entrance points into the temple, lay down rules for admission, welcome folks like us, but make others feel uncomfortable as they pass through. Such are the dangers of temple building.

God reminds David that God has “destroyed all your enemies.” We are a few days from Christmas, what “enemies” can God help us deal with these days? The “enemies of the season” are many. For example, we carry idealized pictures in our heads of what a “merry Christmas” should look like—the Hallmark card version. Very few, if any, of us can match that image, either from our past or in our present. God will help us work with the realities we face and will be born among us in the real-life scenes of our daily lives. God will help us deal with the loneliness some of us experience in this season; God will travel with us in that wilderness. God will be the assurance we need as we feel so inadequate for the way this season is

advertised--- a jolly time of “good will towards all.” God will also feed our hunger to see Jesus born again among us after so many half-hearted attempts on our part for renewal and re-commitment to faith.

Which moves our attention to the gospel reading and the announcement of the birth of the descendent of David, Jesus, whose “kingdom will have no end.” The gospel shows that God did exactly what God had always wanted to do, build a temple in human flesh and pitch another “meeting tent” among us. This temple would be lasting, mobile and the sure place of encounter with our God. God chooses to dwell right in our midst, as a human descendent of David. Mary is asked to help fulfill God’s ancient plan to establish the house of David forever. When Mary asks how all this will happen, she is assured that “the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” There it is--- the language of the Exodus. God’s cloud guided the people in the desert and rested on the “meeting tent” (Exodus 40: 35). This is the God we worship here today, the One who travels with us and rests upon us here in our prayer assembly and then guides our way during the week as we continue our desert travels.

We are very close to Christmas now. It isn’t just in the calendar date; you can hear it in the readings today. God’s promise of a permanent resting place with us is being fulfilled. And where will this God be found? Not in the places of power and world influence; but among those of David’s line, who have known the powerful works of God in their lives. Just as David was instructed to look back and see how God had worked in his and the nation’s life, so we look back and see how God’s hand strengthened us when we were floundering across a difficult desert time. God guided us when we wandered, strengthened us when we faltered and consoled us when we wept.

Who are we gathered here at this Sunday worship? We are descendants of David, in Jesus Christ, who have known the same God who addressed David and who says to us too, “I have been with you, wherever you went...” We are the temple David wanted to build; our lives are also the unique works of art that cover its walls. Together we form a dwelling place for God on earth, a “meeting tent” where others can find God’s presence.

QUOTABLE
A Poem for Christmas

There must be always
remaining in every life,
some place for the
singing of angels.

Some place for that
which in itself
is breathless and
beautiful.

Old burdens become lighter
deep and ancient wounds
lose much of their old hurting.

Despite all the crassness of life,
all the hardness and
harsh discords,
life is saved by
the singing of angels.

--from **The Mood of Christmas**, by Howard Thurman

CHRISTMAS CARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to send a Christmas card to one or more of them to let them know that we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."
Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Elrico Darnell Fowler
- R. W. Tucker
- Clifton White

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (FrJude@JudeOP.org)

"First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

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Blessings on your preaching,
Jude Siciliano, O.P., FrJude@JudeOP.org