

Divergence on the Lectionary - Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year B

First Reading

2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16 (omitted verses in italics)

Now when the king lived in his house and the LORD had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies, the king said to Nathan the prophet, “See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent.” And Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that is in your heart, for the LORD is with you.”

But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, “Go and tell my servant David, “Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?”” Now, therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, “Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. 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 fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come 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. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you.

And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 16:25–27

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 1:26–38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Nowadays, we tend to think of these verses primarily in terms of the foundation of the Davidic line, of which Jesus is the final descendant. But our passage from 2 Samuel for this week can be a bit confusing if you actually look at it carefully. God appears to tell Nathan to say one thing to David, then sends the prophet to contradict what he'd earlier said and deny David the opportunity to build for God a "house to dwell in." It goes on to

promise God's favor to David and his line, but then shifts briefly in verse 10 to say that God's continuing favor will be toward God's people, not the Davidic house.

What this suggests is that the story we're reading on this Sunday actually came from different pens with different purposes. It evolved. In its earliest form Nathan speaks to David in a way that founds the identity of the people of Judah ("Judahites") in the royal line of David. (vv. 1a, 2-3, 11). This layer was perhaps composed during a time when the validity of the Davidic line had come into question (in the late ninth, early eighth century BCE, when there was a break in the reign of Davidic kings, the reign of Athaliah and the assassination of two Davidic kings, Joash and Amaziah, one right after the other). This earliest form of Nathan's oracle gives legitimacy to the Davidic line, standing alone.

The verses that follow accomplish two things. First, they link the royal lineage to Solomon's Temple. Judahite identity is no longer found solely in the royal line but rather in a line linked to the Temple. These verses also explain why the building of the Temple didn't occur during David's reign. There are actually two elements to this explanation. First, the promise to David's house is for a time of "rest from enemies." As David's reign was always one of conflict, he is excused for having failed to build the Temple. But there is also the contrast between the House that David intended to build, a house for God to "dwell in" and the house that Solomon would build, a house "for God's name." The first places limits on God's mobility, the second does not.

This leads toward the third layer of composition of the narrative as we have it now. In the time during and after the Babylonian exile the Davidic line has ceased. There is no king from the line of David in Jerusalem. While in Babylon, the people also had no Temple. So the assertion that the Temple was not God's dwelling, that God chose to remain mobile permitted the people to look to God's presence among them, even in Babylon. Later, upon their return, the shift from identity bound up with the Davidic line shifts to one grounded in the Second Temple, wherein God reigns as the king they lack. This helps explain the shift in verse 10 from God's favor toward David to the favor shown to God's people (and the sudden shift back to David in v. 11). This verse is inserted by a later pen from the Priestly source. (Along with some others.)

Bringing all this back to our reading of it as a whole, and in light of Jesus' Davidic lineage, I think I see why Jesus' identity as both priest and king are so important. The identity of God's people evolved over time, and even though the visible image of a "king" had been taken away, the longing for a God-appointed ruler remained. Also, when the Judahite identity had come to center itself on the Temple, the Messiah's role as Priest had to take center stage. A king alone could not satisfy the identity that had been forged during the time of the First Temple. Add to that the Deuteronomic promise of a

“prophet like Moses” and the central role of the prophet Nathan in founding the Davidic line, and we have the sources for all of the roles of the Messiah, “prophet, priest, and king.”

I am tempted to go on, speculating as to the importance of the Temple-based identity and the shift in Paul to the body as the new Temple of God, but I think I’ll leave that for y’all to chew on!

Second Reading

Ah, Paul, the master of the run-on sentence. If my 7th grade English teacher had seen me write what we have this week, I think she’d have made break it down to something like this. “Now to him who is able to strengthen you.... be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! He who has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations. (Even though there’s no real verb in that sentence.) All of this according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, *to bring about the obedience of faith.*”

She’d have had me rewrite it that way because these words in italics would have been my point, as it was Paul’s point. To bring about the obedience of faith. He tucks it neatly between halves of the doxology giving glory to God, and precedes it with references to the source of the phrase’s authority, Paul’s gospel and the prophetic writings, but the point is the obedience. During Year A of the Lectionary we had a lot of readings from Romans. On those weeks I wrote of the conflict between two groups in the Roman congregation(s). Some scholars argue that the groups were law-compliant Jewish Christians and their law-free Gentile counterparts. I prefer Mark Nanos’ reading of law-free Christians worshiping in the synagogue alongside their still-Jewish siblings. In the case of these few phrases, though, it doesn’t matter too much which you prefer. Paul is closing by reminding the Romans of the proper response to faith, which is obedience. He is trying to reinforce the likelihood that the congregation will obey his teachings about how they are to live together with their “weak” siblings even as he closes the letter.

Talk about getting the last word!

Gospel Text

In my studies while preparing to write on this, one of the most beloved of passages in the Bible, I came across some writings that were, to put it kindly, repellent. I don’t know

how I can unread what read, but I'm hoping that God in His mercy will allow me to forget them.

Persisting in my search for something to say about the story of the Annunciation that I hadn't thought or said or read before, I did finally come across one tidbit that I'll share with you. I found an article that unintentionally rebutted (Thank you!) most of the unpleasant stuff I'd read before and also gave me a new answer to an old question I'd had of the text in the past.

That question is this, "Why was Zechariah punished for doubting Gabriel when Mary was not?" In years past I had decided on this answer: Zechariah demanded proof, "How shall I know this?" but Mary asked for explanation, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Mary didn't doubt the truth of what the angel had said, only asked for understanding.

Truth be told, that explanation still works for me, but the author that I found had another explanation that might make better sense in the story's biblical context. It's really pretty simple. Zechariah doubts that he and Elizabeth can have a child because they are "advanced in years." His doubt is more egregious because there is biblical precedent for that sort of conception. Abraham and Sarah were also granted a child in their old age. Mary asks how she can conceive because she has not known a man, she is a virgin. There is no precedent in the Bible for a virgin conception. Her question doesn't represent the same kind of failure of faith.

I like this explanation a lot because Luke is so conscious of the biblical world within which his narrative will live. While Zechariah should have known better, Mary's response seems somewhat akin to Sarah's when she overhears the second prediction of the three men. "Now that I am old, will I again have pleasure?" Sarah has no precedent by which to answer for herself. Neither does Mary. While Luke has fashioned this opening story to evoke memories of the announcement to Hannah in 1 Samuel, it makes perfect sense that he would also expect his readers to make the Genesis connections to Sarah.