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Tents in the desert (Unsplash/Oliver Schweizer)



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Driving from one part of town to another with housing conditions so different that even a 7-year-old felt terribly sad about them, my niece asked, "So, where does God live?" "In your heart," wouldn't cut it. Talking about heaven to this child who had watched space flights and already knew about evolution was not going to work either. (Regarding evolution, she was a doubter: If evolution were real, why weren't zoo monkeys becoming human? Absurd!) But the Christmas story caught her imagination and gave her a context for understanding that there is an infinite variety of answers to her question.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

[December 20, 2020](#)

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16

Psalm 89

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

From the time of the Exodus until the days of Solomon, the God of Israel was believed to dwell in a tent among the people. The wandering Israelites encountered God's glory in the cloud hovering around that mobile abode. When David reached the pinnacle of his power, he wanted to build a temple to permanently replace God's inauspicious and portable dwelling. Using pious language, David was suggesting a major change in Israel's religious life. For the people, a magnificent temple represented a beautiful place for prayer and encounter with God. It would also be a showplace, a testament to the wealth and might of the king who built it. The temple would solidify Jerusalem's role as the capital of the nation, uniting religious and political power. And there's the rub.

When David told Nathan he had decided to build a permanent dwelling for God, the prophet agreed without hesitation. But in less than 24 hours, God rectified the situation. God's critique was pretty clear, saying in effect: "You want to house *me* in a place that *you* would build? Do you recall who made you who you are? I protected

you from the pasture to the battle ground; I brought your ancestors out of Egypt; it is I who placed you here. I have done this *for my people*, and I will continue to be with them. I freely promise to give you a future for generations to come, but you cannot contain *me* in a palace or sanctuary, nor keep *me* under the control of a priesthood."

The problem with David's plan, whether he realized it or not, was that a temple usually turns into an attempt to tame God. The God of Israel continually revealed self as a God of surprises, the God who, unlike lesser gods, created freely and solely out of love. The very name of Israel's God is an unfathomable mystery. This is the God who assures people of every age, "As high as the heavens are above the Earth, so high are my thoughts above your thoughts." Throughout their history, Israel would hear God criticize the temple and its practices far more than approve them. Solomon, David's son who began well by praying for wisdom, ended up not only building the temple, but getting lost in his own drive for power and pleasure.

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Today's first reading and the history of Israel suggest that we won't find God trapped in anybody's temple. So where do we find Emmanuel, God's self-manifestation? Today's Gospel points us in a new direction.

Luke opens this part of his narrative almost as if he were giving lighting directions for a stage presentation. It opens in the divine realm with God and Gabriel. At first, the spotlight shines over all the Earth; then it slowly narrows from Galilee, to Nazareth, and to the people around a young woman.

Finally, it pinpoints Mary. Now dialogue compresses the infinite distance between heaven and Galilee, startling Mary into realizing that heaven is at her humble door and she is asked to be open to giving God space in which to become present as never before. Fully aware that she is incapable of making that happen, she offers herself, the only sacrifice God ever desires. Her words, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord," would become the theme of her son's every prayer, translated into the doublet, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done."

The mystery of the Annunciation answers my niece's question. We'll do best to seek God's abode on the outskirts of importance. While people build luxurious

tabernacles, filling them with gold, polyphony and incense, God's most Earth-shattering appearances have been witnessed not in Jerusalem, Rome or Washington, D.C., but in Nazareth and Bethlehem, on an executioners' hill outside the city, or at tables where simple people gather in prayer.

Absurd as some will judge it, God lives, not where people build basilicas to reflect their own glory, but wherever people make space in their lives to welcome unexpected epiphanies. God will never fail to dwell among those who pray with Mary and say, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord."

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