

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost - 19 July 2009 - Proper 11 B  
2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56  
James V. Stockton

There are three secrets to success in real estate; at least this is what the experts say. There are three secrets, and they are: location, location, and location. Real estate has a lot of meaning for people in our culture. It suggests stability, perhaps upward mobility, and it offers a sense of security, as well as identity. Home: it's all about location, location, location.

I read about a priest who is at the pearly gates, awaiting his entrance to his new home in heaven. Not that a priest cannot get into heaven, but I do not want to mislead anyone; this is a fictitious story. So, standing in line, the priest overhears St. Peter. He is speaking to the person just ahead in line. "Welcome!" says St. Peter. "I understand that in life you were bus driver." The woman nods. "Fine," declares St. Peter. "I'm in charge of housing around here," Peter explains. "And I think I have found the perfect place for you." The woman's eyes grow wide with anticipation. "Do you see that mansion on that hill over there?" as St. Peter. The woman is speechless; she nods her head eagerly. "Well, that's yours," declares St. Peter.

Location, location, location. It's all about the real estate. At least, this is what King David seems to believe as we hear in the reading from the Old Testament for today. David has become the king of Israel. This is what God called him to be. He has the qualities that mark both a fine person *and* a humble follower of God. The combination makes David the great king that the people have been seeking, and that David has finally allowed God to enable him to become. Therefore, what David decides he should do next as king seems simply a good idea arising from a good person.

David wants to make a house for the ark of the Covenant, the vessel of the presence of God. It will provide a sense of permanence of place where the ark of the presence will be safe and secure, cared for and appreciated, honored and revered. It seems like a pretty good idea. David's royal prophet, Nathan, thinks so, too. Until the prophet hears from God. "Ask David a question

for me," God says to Nathan. "Ask him, 'Do you recall, David, that I ever asked anyone, anywhere, at any time, to build me a house?'" "Ask David," says God, "'Why do you think that I suddenly need a house today? And why do you think I need *you* to build it for me?'"

Something has happened that has caused David to miss God's direction, and to miss it widely. If it seemed like a good and common sense idea, to bring the virtues of location to the presence of God, then maybe David has forgotten something from his own more recent past. Maybe David has forgotten that when the people first ever asked God simply to appoint for them a king this, too, seemed like a good common sense idea. The Philistines, the Canaanites, the Amalekites, the Amorites, all the tribes around them have their kings or queens. At the time, it seemed just good common sense that for the people of Israel the secret to their success would be monarchy, monarchy, monarchy.

But God had tried then, too, to tell the people otherwise. God told the prophet Samuel, "Make sure the people know they do not need royalty just in order to attain somehow the prestige they perceive in those around them." And in that instance back then, the people refused to listen. And so they found their king in Saul, who turned out to be self-assured, self-righteous, arrogant, and eventually even a little crazy. So, if a king was a bad idea back then, though God has now redeemed that idea by giving David to the people as their king, what's so wrong, now, with David making a permanent house for the presence of God?

God does go on to assure David that an ancestor of David will indeed build a house, a temple, for the ark of the covenant, and that's fine and good. But let's pay close attention to what God actually says here, and to what God does *not* say. God does say that David's heir will build the Temple, but God does not say that this is necessarily a good thing. God does not say that God *wants* the Temple to be built, but only that it *will* be built. The distinction ends

up being all about where people can find God. And so, it is also about where people are able ultimately to confine God.

The Apostle Paul writes to some of the earliest Christians. He reminds them that they once were regarded as a people far from the presence of God, by a people who regarded themselves as custodians and owners of God's presence in the world. 'Now, though,' writes Paul, 'the wall between you and them has been torn down. Christ has broken down the barrier,' he writes, 'and you are all one household.' 'All of you together,' he says, 'are a structure, built upon a foundation comprised of the apostles, prophets, and Jesus himself. If once, God's presence was far from you, or you from it, now,' writes Paul, 'all of you together are growing into a temple; becoming a dwelling place for God.'

It's all about location, location, location. "See that mansion over there on the hilltop?" St. Peter asks the bus driver. "That's yours!" he declares. The priest next in line at the pearly gates hears this, and stands a little taller. "If a bus driver gets a place like that," he thinks to himself, "I can just imagine what I'll get."

It's all about location, location, location. "Come away to a deserted place," says Jesus to his disciples. And as soon as they think they can escape the crowds, sure enough, the crowds turn up again. The sick, the hurting, the outcast, and the poor, all are still coming to Jesus wherever he is. Even if they need to trek out into the wilderness, with their problems, with their aches and pains, with their broken hearts, with their friends in need, these more than most will give the effort, will make the journey, just to get near to Jesus. These more than most are seeking anything at all of God's guidance, listening for anything at all of God's encouragement, groping around for anything that might feel just a little bit like God.

These more than most, then, are aware that there is something of God in Jesus' voice, in Jesus' gaze, in Jesus' touch. More than most, these are aware that they are finding the presence of God located here in Jesus. At the same time, in these sheep without a shepherd, within these people of God who have yet to learn that they are

people of God, Jesus finds within them God's presence already located there and waiting just for him.

The priest in line at the Pearly Gates moves up toward St. Peter. "If a bus driver gets a mansion, I can hardly wait to see what I get!" "Welcome," says St. Peter. "I understand that in life you were a priest." "Yes sir!" the priest agrees. "Well, do you see that shack down there in that valley?" ask Peter. And he barely gets the words out of his mouth. "But I preached the gospel!" the priest protests. "I taught people about God! Why does that bus driver get a mansion on a hilltop and I, a priest, get just a lowly shack?" "I'm sorry," says St. Peter, "but it seems that while people were in your church and you were preaching they were all asleep and dreaming. But when they were in her bus and she was driving, they were all awake and praying."

It's about location, location, location. No matter people's efforts, those of other's or our own, to capture God in one kind of place, in one kind of opinion, in one kind of people, God will always show up for us nearer than we can hope for and closer than we might chose. Thanks be to God, we have no need for a scary bus-ride to open wide our eyes, our ears, our hearts, or to awaken those around us. At once both comforting and disturbing, the presence of God is as close as your recognition of a neighbor, as near as my need for a friend. Thanks be to God that any around us seeking a welcome home, a safe secure place, a love for them as they are, a sense of movement upward, inward, toward God; thanks be to God that all who cross our paths today, tomorrow, all who are listening, looking, feeling around for anything of God's Love, will find God as personal to them as are you and I, will find God as present to them as you and I simply choose to be.

And so may Almighty God, lover of all souls, bring us to the fullness of grace for which God, through Christ our Savior, has prepared us and all whom God has made; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

© 2009, James V. Stockton