

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on December 21, 2014	On the occasion of the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year B

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

The Favored

For generations the God of Israel roamed around with his people. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was nomadic, as were his chosen people, his favored people. As they traveled, they carried the covenant written on stone tablets in an ark, and the Ark rested in a tent. The people lived in tents, and so did their God, the “tent of meeting” it was called. Moses would meet and converse with God in that tent. God’s presence was manifest in that tent. Then they came into the land that had been promised to their ancestors. For the first time in anyone’s memory they began to live in houses. They began to plant crops. They put down roots in their new homeland. Over time they became more and more like the nations around them, even setting a king over the people. David, the second king of Israel, God’s chosen king, his favored one, built himself a house, and he determined to build a house for God too. But did God want a house? For all those years God never complained about living in a tent. In a tent, he was free to move about, to be in the midst of his people. God was mobile, with no permanent residence.

Just as Moses never got to enter into the Promised Land with the people, David never got to build that house for God. It was left to his son, Solomon, to build the Temple in Jerusalem. And what a Temple he built! It was glorious, a fitting abode for such a mighty God. The Ark was placed in the Temple, and it was the footstool of God, the foundation of his throne. The priest and prophet Isaiah, while serving in the Temple, would later see a vision of God on his throne, high and lofty, the hem of his robe filling the whole Temple. From that Temple on top of Mount Zion God would reign over his people and the land that he had promised them. It was the

only place where his people could worship God. It was the center of the universe, but was it really an improvement on that old tent?

The Babylonians came and conquered God's people, and destroyed God's house, and took God's people into exile. The Psalmist lamented:

“By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept,
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
We hung up our harps.
For there our captors
Asked us for songs.
And our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How could we sing the Lord's song
In a foreign land? Psalm 137

How could they worship God when they were so far away from where God lived? How could they expect any help from God while they were in a foreign country, ruled over by foreign gods? The answer came in the vision of another prophet, Ezekiel. The presence of the Lord was like fire in the sky. He rode about in a gleaming chariot drawn by four living creatures, with wheels within wheels, moving about in all directions. God was mobile again! God had come to his people in exile, and he would later make a straight highway through the desert to bring them back to the Promised Land, to bring them home again. When they returned, they rebuilt the Temple. They restored God's home to its rightful glory.

God's chosen people continued to live in the land. Over the centuries they had some kings who failed to be faithful to God, and they had some kings who were faithful, like David. God never abandoned his people; he never forgot the covenant he had made with them; he never lost his favor for them. But God longed to be with his people in a new way. God had seen how their sin had made them miserable. He heard their cries for mercy. He knew their suffering. And he intended to come down and pitch his tent among them. So one day God sent his angel,

Gabriel, to a young woman named Mary. Now, just as God had chosen Moses, who had been the son of slaves, to lead his people to freedom; and just as God had chosen David, who was the youngest and smallest of the seven sons of Jesse, to be king over his people; and just as God had chosen the Israelites, who were a small and insignificant people, to be his people, and to be the instrument of his salvation for the whole world; God had chosen Mary, a young, poor, unmarried woman to be the bearer of his Son, to bear his own very presence into the world.

The angel greeted her as the favored one of God. So highly favored was she that her womb would become the tent of flesh that held God's presence. God would once again be mobile. God would once again be with his people. But this time, God would be with us as one of us.

How did Mary hear the words of Gabriel? Did she feel favored to be given this mission? It was clearly a difficult task she had been called to. It was clear that this child she would bear would not be her child in the way that mothers have had children before. This child would belong to the whole world. She would bear him knowing that she would lose him. That must have been a very difficult thing. Yet she said "yes" to God's call. She agreed to be part of God's plan for salvation. She took on the role. She took on the burden. She took on the pain and the shame. She took on the responsibility of being God's favored one.

At funerals, we often read from the fourteenth chapter of John's Gospel. "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." How comforting that is. To think that Jesus himself has gone before us, and has prepared a place just for us, an eternal home where

we can be with him, and with God forever. And that he, himself, will come again, and will take us to himself. What a comforting thought. What a beautiful, inspiring, comforting thought.

I suppose the question is: When Jesus comes to us, will he find a place that we have prepared just for him, a place where his presence may abide, a place where he may pitch his tent? When Jesus comes to us, will we be willing to offer our own flesh to be his dwelling place on earth? Will we say “yes”? Will we take on the mission to which he calls us? Will we accept the responsibility of being God’s favored one?

Amen.