

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16, Magnificat, Romans 16:25-27, Luke 1:26-38

“We beseech thee, Almighty God, to purify our consciences by thy daily visitation, that when thy Son our Lord cometh he may find in us a mansion prepared for himself”

I was struck as I read this collect and today’s readings by how much we find the image of houses and dwelling places in the texts for today. This language in our opening prayer about each of us being houses – mansions, in fact! – for God is followed close by with this line from 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel. God’s words are on the lips of the prophet Nathan as God turns down David’s desire to build a temple for Him saying, “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 and a tabernacle.”

We have a travelling God, a God who visits us – who does not dwell in one place only. Who, in the words of the Gospel according to John, even “became flesh and dwelt – or as the Greek word also means - *pitched his tent* among us.” Who makes His home in many places.

We have a God whom we can find when we come to church, but who equally comes along with us when we leave. Who comes and takes up residence in our homes, visits us at work and school and in numberless unexpected situations and encounters.

We have a God whose presence is always everywhere – often hidden just below the surface of our perception.

A God who frankly states that we see Him every time we see a human being who is sick, or hungry, or in prison, or in need. Whom we see every time we look at any human who has been baptized and become a member of the Body of Christ.

Indeed, we see God in *every* human being, since Chapter One of the Bible already confirms to us that every time we look at a human, we are gazing on the image of God.

God comes to meet us everywhere. So, despite how challenging it often may be to perceive Him, we can find God everywhere.

But today we hear the story of a woman who was blessed to find God present to her in an incredible, profound, unmistakable way. We hear of Mary, who bore God in her own body. Who for 9 months was a house – a home for God upon earth.

Mary, who set up a home for God to live in as a child. Whose relationship with God included daily conversations – in which God spoke audibly back! Whose depth of relationship with God is something for us to wonder at. (If not, frankly, to become a little jealous of!)

But it was a strange blessing that Mary received. As I prepared for this sermon, I found a line from the New Interpreter’s Bible I found so striking I had to share it. It says: “**Mary, God’s favored one, was blessed with having a child out of wedlock who would later be executed as a criminal.** Acceptability, prosperity, and comfort have never been the essence of God’s blessing. The story is so familiar that we let its familiarity mask its scandal.”

It is a strange, scandalous, incomprehensible kind of blessing we see in the story of Mary. When Mary hears the angel’s news and conceives God inside herself, she says, “the Lord has magnified me” – she is blessed and made great by this visitation from God, by this incredible presence of God in her life.

But in her life this also meant being a source of scandal. Being at risk of being abandoned by her fiancé. Living all her life as one whom people whispered about – that her husband wasn't the father of her son, later that her son was "beside himself" – insane – and that he was a blasphemer. And later, that she was the mother of an executed criminal, a criminal who started a strange new religious community that was under suspicion and persecution from the government. A strange blessing indeed.

But Mary would have known much joy, too. Much delight in her son and in learning so much about God, coming to know God so well, even right in the middle of these hardships. Just as we each experience in Advent, this season of light shining darkness, so Mary would have had many visions of light in the midst of profound struggles in her life.

I was thinking of how much we humans love images of Mary with the baby Jesus – like that lovely statue by the Lady Altar. That statue clearly shows a moment of great joy and light. And I was wondering if the popularity of this Christmas-y image might seem to hide or avoid the hardship and the suffering that this mother and child endured.

But I think not entirely. I think the next two most common or popular or famous images of Mary and Jesus are probably Mary at the foot of the Cross, and images of Mary cradling Jesus' body in her arms after his crucifixion – a tragic mirror of that image of Mother and Child.

Not without reason is Mary known throughout the world under the name "Our Lady of Sorrows." Not without reason did the prophet Simeon, when Mary and Joseph came to the temple to give thanks for the birth of Jesus, foretell to Mary: "A sword shall pierce your heart."

Mary's story teaches us that sorrow and suffering do *not* mean we are not blessed, favored, and beloved of God. Mary's story teaches us that those whom God loves still may experience profound hardship.

But even in the midst of the pains of life, we will also find moments like that Madonna and Child statue.

And these moments don't come at just one happy, easy season of life. They are hidden in every day, though we often are too distracted or worn out to notice. Today's collect tells us that God makes "*daily* visitations" to us.

Our travelling God, our on-the-move God, our God who makes His home in many places, comes and finds us every day. Comes and "pitches His tent" among us *every day*. Comes and enters into our very selves, and makes us, makes our bodies His home.

And perhaps the most profound way He does that will happen in just a few minutes. We re-encounter the Incarnation – God come to Earth in physical form – at every Eucharist. The Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood brings the Incarnation to us, as Jesus Christ becomes present to us in a strange, shocking, physical, and vulnerable form.

And just like the story we hear of God entering into Mary's very body, when we receive the Sacrament, God comes and enters into each of our very bodies. And so we become like her – countless homes for God. Vessels of God's presence and grace. Bearers of the most holy and sacred mystery of God's real presence in human lives.

And I pray that as we receive God into ourselves once more today, we might each be able to welcome Him with Mary's words – "*Here I am*, the servant of the Lord," and then joyously go forth in the name of Christ to bear God's presence out into world with us. Amen.