

At the beginning of our first lesson, we hear that King David has finally settled in his house and the Lord has given him rest from the enemies all around him. Imagine him sitting on his royal ottoman with his feet up, a roaring fire and a nice warm drink at his side. Ahhh...

This rest from enemies is fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. Finally, the Israelites are settled in the land that God has promised them, having defeated the Jebusites and Amalkites and the Philistines and assorted other enemies. And David has finally led the ark of the covenant into the city of Jerusalem. So naturally he settles in for a well-deserved rest.

But it doesn't seem like he rests for long. Maybe David is one of those type A people that can't sit still. Because right away he is posing an idea to the prophet Nathan. David, sensing a kind of unfairness, says to Nathan, "Gee, I have this great house made of Cedar, but the ark of God just lives in a tent." The implication is that David has it in mind to build a fine house, a temple, for God.

God has just guided him through numerous military battles, and David has followed God's guidance, winning each one. But now all the sudden David is deciding for God instead of following God.

It sounds like David's motivations are quite pure, after all, he has a fine house of cedar so it's not fair that God would not have a house at all—that just doesn't seem right. But David wouldn't be the first leader to try and cement his position through an open and obvious show of religiosity. And he wouldn't be the first leader to try and claim God under

the mantle of his political authority. David wouldn't be the first national leader to try and subvert the sovereignty of God to his particular purposes. If God is in the temple that David had built, then God will be available when needed, and not called on when the presence of God might otherwise be considered inconvenient. God in the temple becomes what theologian Walter Breuggemann describes as "God on call."

But clearly God is wise to David and his motivations. That same night the word of the Lord comes to Nathan. You know, you don't think of the word of the Lord coming to God's prophets in a sarcastic tone, but these words of God sure do sound sarcastic. "Are *you* the one to build *me* a house to live in?" "Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying 'Why have you not build me a house of cedar?'"

God has been free to go where God chooses, and God is telling David, through Nathan, that David's plans notwithstanding, God will continue to freely go where God chooses. God is a free God, not an on-call God. And God in God's freedom has chosen to walk with the people, through the garden, alongside Abraham and Sarah as they conceive in their old age, with the Israelites in the midst of their slavery and into their freedom. With David, as he moved from shepherd to king. If any houses are going to be made, God says, God will do the making, God will make the house of David a throne established forever.

Is the God of our understanding an on-call god, or a free God? A God who we call on as we feel we need God, but a God who is otherwise distant from our lives. A God who matches our categories and who fits into the container that we shape, or a God who is free to break into our lives, at any time, in any way, any place? Which is our God?

A God who is free will engage the world in whatever way God chooses. That God cannot be contained in a house, or a temple, or a set of categories or the smallness of our imaginations. A God who is free will engage the world in ways that will shock us, in ways that will surprise us and in ways that we would never imagine in our wildest dreams. A God who is free may engage the world in ways that call us out of the expected into the unexpected.

That's the God we hear about in our gospel lesson. Not willing to be contained in a house of David's making, God makes plan to come into the world in a very different way.

Rod and I stopped in at Tasty Tacos last Monday's... you know because that's the restaurant that's closest to Menards...

And I noticed, especially since I was preparing to preach on today's readings, that they have a mat on the floor in front of the counter reading, "*Nada es imposible.*" Nothing is impossible. And I thought to myself—reflecting on the words of the angel Gabriel, "I bet some things are impossible for the staff of Tasty Tacos."

Our gospel introduces us to a virgin. A woman engaged to a man named Joseph. A man who is of the house of David. A woman whose name is Mary. Mary would have been a young teenager, 12- or 13-years-old. She was betrothed to Joseph. Betrothal in the first century was very different than contemporary notions of engagement. To be betrothed meant that a contractual agreement had been executed between the two families. Extensive negotiation would have taken place as transfer was planned for the woman—or girl really—from her father's care to her husband's care.

Mary's experience up to this point was much the same as any other girl living in the Middle East at this time. It was the ordinary way of things.

But God, in God's freedom acts in a way that radically changes Mary's life and no longer will she experience the world in the way she expected, or the way that anyone else expected. Mary is suddenly connected to God's house-creating project with David in a way that she would never have imagined, never would have conceived of, you might say.

The angel Gabriel greets Mary with the words, "Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you." God's favor—an expression of God's freedom—means for Mary that she moves from ordinary peasant girl to a disciple. It means she moves from obscurity to Mother of God. It means that nothing about her life will be as it was before, nothing will go the way she expected.

Understandably, her response is confusion and doubt. "How can this be?" she asks. But in a few short verses, through what must have been a persuasive answer from the angel Gabriel, she says "yes" to God's unexpected intervention in her life.

Are we ready to be favored by God?

In the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye is returning home from a party celebrating Lazer Wolf's engagement to his daughter when he encounters the local Russian authority and learns that there is going to be a small action in Anatevka—a pogrom. In response Tevye prays, "Dear God. Did you have to send me news like that today of all days? I know, I know we are the chosen people. But once in a while, can't you choose someone else?"

Is our God an on-call God, there for us when needed but otherwise in the background of our lives? Or is our God a free God. Are we ready to let God out of the box of our own imagining and accept that God is at work in our lives—all the time? Are we

ready to trust that God will do what God will do, even when that means that God's freedom favors our life in a way we didn't imagine and couldn't have expected?

If God's freedom doesn't make you a little nervous, then you may not be paying attention. It's true, when we let God into our lives fully and as freely, it can mean changes we didn't expect. It can mean we do things we never thought we would do. It can mean we find ourselves in places we never thought we would be. If that doesn't make you a little nervous, you may not be paying attention.

But here's the good news. First, God's freedom means that God is not in the box we would keep God in. There when we think we need him and put away when we don't. Because we need God a whole lot more than we think we do, and God in God's freedom is with us—when we think we need God, and when we think we don't.

God walked in the garden. God was with Abraham and Sarah in their old age as they unexpectedly conceived a child. God was with the slaves in Egypt. God walked the desert with the newly freed Israelites—guiding them day and night and blessing them with commandments. God guided David from shepherd to king. And God promised that God would not take God's steadfast love from David, not ever. David's house and his kingdom would be made sure forever before God, and his throne would be established forever.

God is with us, not just when we think we need God, but all the time. Not just in the way that we imagine, but often in ways unimaginable. Not just when we are living faithful lives but also in the midst of our least faithful moments. God walks with us, not at our beck and call, but freely.

And more good news. Because God in God's freedom chose to come into our lives in the person of Jesus Christ, and because Jesus freely walked the path that led to the cross,

we have forgiveness for those times—those many times—when we would attempt to keep God in a box of our own making. We have forgiveness for those times when we would not call on our on-call God. We have forgiveness for the times that we decline to say “yes” to God’s gracious and compelling invitation. And because God loved us enough to send Jesus Christ into our lives, we have the freedom to listen for God’s call and we have the freedom to say “yes” to God’s call, trusting that God will walk with us through whatever it is that God calls us to do.

God is not an on-call God, God is a free God, choosing to be an intimate part of our day to day lives. And thanks be to God for that!