

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

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Each September my husband Randy and I take our children to the York County Fair, one of the oldest county fairs in the country. Randy grew up in York. It's been his tradition to go to the fair every year, so we've made it our family tradition—there's plenty to see and do and eat. We go to the animal pavilions to see the cows, sheep and goats. We check out the rabbits and chickens, often witnessing a baby chick hatching out of its egg in the big incubator. And we always learn the weight of the biggest pumpkin in York County—over 900 pounds this year. As we journey between pavilions we eat, and just about everything we eat has plenty of trans fats in it.

The only downside of the fair, besides how it might affect your arteries, is the parking. Side street parking is quite limited, but for \$5 you can park on the fairgrounds. That's when you meet up with *the parking guards*. For 11 days of the year, people with no previous experience don bright orange vests and wave orange batons to guide the fair-goers to their appointed parking space. Something happens the moment they don those orange vests. It's a power thing. They love their job. They love being in charge. And we hapless fair-goers just do whatever they command us to do. One year, the first parking guard told us to go down that long row and take a right. When we drove down that long row and took a right, the second parking guard told us to take a left. Then, when we got to the third parking guard, why, he had found a little space for us to park in. He had us maneuver in and out, having us turn our wheel this way and that, and in and out, and in . . . and then—only then were we allowed to shut off the ignition and get out of our car.

Still, those waving orange batons are preferable to what Randy's great-uncle wanted to carry years ago. My father-in-law told me that his uncle was also a parking guard at the York County Fair, and relished the job so much that he tried to gain permission to carry a gun. Those hiring the parking guards wisely denied him permission, but he, too, loved being in charge. As many of us do. Most of us prefer taking control of a situation, that we may determine its outcome. We often do so with all the good intentions in the world, because we're sure we know the best way to handle the situation.

King David is in charge as our Old Testament lesson opens up. He has good intentions, he makes a noble gesture—truly he does. What David wants to do is take the stone tablets upon which the Ten Commandments have been carved, and put them in what **he** believes is a suitable home. These tablets of stone, the ones Moses received from the Lord God, and then carried down Mt. Sinai, have been traveling with the Israelites for years in a beautiful container called the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark itself was kept in a tent. The Israelites understood that somehow the Lord God himself was present with this Ark and its contents. Yet, even after bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, Israel kept it in a tent. So, what's wrong with King David wanting to take the Ark of the Covenant, and the stone tablets of the Law it contains, and place it in a beautiful temple? It's a perfectly reasonable and fitting thing to do. After all, David himself as king has an impressive home.

So King David takes this idea to his prophet, Nathan, for confirmation. Nathan voices preliminary approval—good idea; run with it.

But no one bothered to check with the Lord God. The One who had given the Law and established this covenantal relationship and offered his continual presence among his people—no one bothered to ask him for **his** thoughts on the matter, or seek his approval. The Lord God comes to Nathan and says, "In all my journeys with my chosen people, have I ever asked 'Why haven't you built me a house of cedar?'" Read between the lines and hear this question: "Just who's in charge here?"

Then the prophet Nathan told King David of the revelation he had received from the Lord God. Because David loved the Lord, he listened and obeyed. He had been duly reminded who was in charge.

Of course, he would soon forget. If you read further into 2nd Samuel, David begins an adulterous affair with Bathsheba, with devastating consequences, resulting in the murder of Bathsheba's husband. David tells lie upon lie in order to cover it all up. And it will be the prophet Nathan, knowing the Lord God's desire for righteousness, who goes to David once again to remind him just who's in charge.

Now, this is what I'd say to David, if I were Nathan: What's it going to be, David? First you plan to put God in a temple you want to build. Then you're involved in sinful behavior and I'm sure you were hoping, David, that the Lord God you loved so much and wanted around so much happened not to notice, was looking the other way, had taken a day trip out of Jerusalem. You can't have it both ways. You either desire God's presence in your life, or you don't. Either God's in charge, or you think **you're** in charge and if so, you're on your own.

How much like David we are! Certainly there are times we'd rather not have God around—like when his desire that we be holy takes our fun away, when he exhorts us to give sacrificially of ourselves, or when he calls us to forgive. God's presence can be highly inconvenient.

But then there are places in our lives where we **want** God. We want him there when we're hurting or in trouble or facing big decisions. We want him to help us out by letting our team win, or keeping the rain off our outdoor event. We want him to bless our lives and possessions and relationships, and we constantly ask him to do just that. That's when God's in demand. The truth is we'd prefer being able to maneuver him around in our lives with our orange batons, just as those parking guards at the fair relished maneuvering our car around. We want to be in charge of our own lives.

Theologian Joseph Sittler tells the story of a woman in his congregation who worked at a city hospital and had a particular understanding of prayer that consisted of maneuvering God around in order to obtain whatever it was she wanted. One day she said to Sittler, "You know, pastor, when I am driving to work, I always pray to Jesus that He will find me a parking space. And do you know something, Pastor? He always does!"

Pastor Sittler was concerned, because he wondered what kind of faith can be built on a parking-space-finding Jesus. What kind of faith can be built on that notion that would help sustain her when true loss or tragedy was experienced, when something critical occurred? And so he considered an appropriate response to this parishioner. One day he said, "Emma, just suppose there's a woman on the second lane in the highway, and she's driving to the hospital because she has a sick child beside her and she's frantic with worry and you pull into the parking space that Jesus got for you and she drives up and she can't find a place to park?"

He really thought he had her, but Emma, being a take-charge kind of person replied, "She didn't pray hard enough."

So Pastor Sittler considered again, and when a response came to him, he knew it was pure gift from God. The next Sunday he said, "Emma, what do you suppose Mary was praying about as she jogged along on that donkey, all the way to Bethlehem?"

Emma never brought up the subject again.

There must be something wrong with the idea of a parking-space-finding Jesus. There must be something wrong with our desire to be in control, maneuvering God where we think it's best he be.

For if Mary couldn't find a parking space in Bethlehem to give birth to this son, God's son, then there must be something wrong with the notion that God is somehow at our disposal and our whim. God works his will for us and for our sake and for our lives, but it is on his terms, not ours. That's a little hard to swallow for those of us who like to be in charge.

Now if Mary had been a savvy, sophisticated, educated Mary, she would have confronted the Angel Gabriel with a list of demands—a few perks she'd insist upon. Like a posh suite at the Bethlehem Holiday Inn, three squares a day,

a year's worth of diaper service—oh, and a PR person to manage the fallout from the news of a young Jewish maiden conceiving by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But that wasn't Mary's way. Granted, Mary did momentarily forget who was in charge of her life in the bewildering knowledge of what was about to happen to her. The first thing she said to Gabriel is, "How can this possibly be?" But just as David listened to the prophet Nathan when he spoke the word of God to him, Mary listened to Gabriel when he spoke the word of God to her. And she obeyed.

This is what Gabriel told her—that she would conceive in her womb and bear a son, whom she was to name Jesus. Jesus would be great. The Lord God would give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he would reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there would be no end. But the words that truly sealed it were, "Nothing will be impossible with God."

Here's the wonderful irony of these two lessons today. Even though King David wants to build a house, it's the Lord God who will do so. And the house the Lord God will build is a royal house, a dynasty in the family line of David. When that dynasty begins to crumble, when king after king in Israel and Judah begin to think they're in charge, and turn away, ruling their people perversely, God will take charge once again. He does not delegate, but takes charge in the most hands-on sort of way: God incarnate, God's holy and righteous word in the flesh, Jesus Christ. This is God's plan for saving us. It is his decision, it is his will, it is his doing, and it's not ours.

In less than a week we celebrate what David could only imagine and what Mary pondered in her heart. The birth of Jesus Christ is the Lord God's refusal to be maneuvered in and out of our lives, used for our own purposes. Jesus Christ is the Lord God taking charge once and for all, for our sake. It is not a matter of us picking and choosing where we want him in our life; he wants to be there with us in all of it, that he may take us and all that we are and transform us into his holy people. So we respond in the same humble, grateful way as Mary: *Here I am . . . let it be with me according to your word. Amen.*