

The House of Jacob

2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16

Luke 1:26-38

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2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16

Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you."

But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? 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. 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 built me a house of cedar?" Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house....Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

Luke 1: 26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

The second longest running off-Broadway play was entitled, 'I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change.' Through a series of vignettes that were connected by the central theme of love and relationships, the play lived up to its' tagline: "Everything you have ever secretly thought about dating, romance, marriage, lovers, husbands, wives and in-laws, but were afraid to admit." From the blank mind efforts of trying to create a dating profile, to the initial sparks that lead to the hesitant awkwardness of a first date, to the highs and lows of different times in relationships, and on to the jitters and joys of a wedding, through the maze that marriage can be, and on through the adventures of birth and parenting and on into the twilight years, the witty musical revue tackled modern love in all its perils, pitfalls, possibilities and promises. It was as insightful as it was hilarious and so ultimately universal in all that it captured that the musical has been translated into 17 languages. We are a world that wants to understand love, to be loved for who we are, and to find someone we can love for who they are. We are looking for unconditional love, knowing that one of the greatest things in life is finding someone who knows our mistakes, doubts, insecurities, failures and differences and still thinks we are amazing. We want to be loved without restriction, trusted without fear, wanted without demand, and to be accepted just as we are.

This looking is an endless quest, as such unconditionally loving relationships are not easy to come by despite humanity's need and desire for them. Things can start this way, but maintaining any relationship without some conditions stretches and often snaps our abilities. Any relationship—dating, marriage, friendship, co-workers, parents, siblings—can experience the initial sense of perfection in the other that is unconditional, yet for a whole host of reasons there is a shift so that unconditional becomes conditional. I will love you except for.....and here is where we start inserting various limits, or have them inserted about us. I love you, you were perfect, now you need to change. It's universal; we have been both the givers and the receivers of conditional love.

There is a special truth about unconditional love. As Stephen Rendrick writes, "The only way your love can last a lifetime, is if it's unconditional. The truth is this, love is not determined by the one being loved, but rather by the one choosing to love."

That is the core truth. Love is determined not by the one receiving love, but by the one who is choosing to love unconditionally. This is the one choosing to love us at our best as well as at our worst, to love us through all the muck, mud and messiness that makes up our lives. No matter how good or bad we look or act. On both our good and bad days, both when we are pretty and even when we are petty. Both in the funny moments and on grumpy mornings. We want to be loved as we are from day to day. We want to be respected for being human yet always loved through this thing called life. We want to be loved when we draw sad faces all over an important piece of paper because we are so saddened by the ongoing limits of the pandemic restrictions. We want to be loved when we cry in frustration at plans having to be broken once again. We want to be loved when we yell in misdirected anger because 2020 has just been too hard, painful and frustrating.

Unconditional love is given from one who knows us as we are, understands where we have been, accepts what we have become and yet still gently allows us to grow and to be who we were created to be. It's God's unconditional love that reaches out to soften even the hardest of hearts.

On this fourth Sunday in Advent, we remember God's promise of unconditional love first announced to David through the prophet Nathan. "I will make for you a great name, like the

name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house....Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

When God had established the covenant with the nation of Israel, God was king, and Israel was to have no other king other than God. But in the law, itself, God made provisions for the day in which they would have a human king, a king who would not replace God, but represent God to the people. That comes to fulfillment with King David, and the covenant God made with him that in many ways is a continuation of the covenant with Abraham. God promised David that he will have a son, an heir, to sit on his throne forever, and that that son will be God's son, God's king, God's divine representative, and that son will deliver God's people. God chose David and his heirs unconditionally, there was nothing they could do to make this happen, or not happen. When the time was right, the covenanted promised would be fulfilled.

The time was right when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, a young woman engaged to Joseph, of the house of David. "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary has important questions, and even more so, an open mind, a willing heart, and deep faith. Although she would not have been allowed in the area of the synagogue where the men were taught, she had learned a number of things over time. She knew about the hope of Israel, that the long-awaited Messiah would come and redeem Israel. Now, Mary would be the mother of the promise of unconditional love.

An announcement came to David, an annunciation came to Mary, and the everlasting house of David, house of God, would be born so that all heirs of our faith ancestor David would know unconditional love. This Unconditional Love made flesh that will again be born in a Bethlehem stable, that will grow to live a life of teaching, healing, comforting, forgiving, welcoming, and the ultimate gift of love upon a cross and be resurrected for us, comes again in just a few days. In the infant asleep on the hay we will again see God's unconditional love for us, even in the midst of a year that has been filled with illness, heartache, uncertainty, and losses upon losses. We will look upon the gifts brought to the baby in the manger, and remember the ultimate gifts of the baby for us. "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." He will bring hope, justice and unconditional love, and as his followers, call us to share in offering hope, justice and unconditional love. Find a heart that loves you at your worst, and arms that will hold you at your weakest. Be a heart that loves another at their worst, and offer arms that hold them at their weakest, as the measure of love is love without measure. Amen.