



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 host, "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 evil-doers shall afflict them no more. "As formally 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. This is the word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

- This reading is from the first chapter of the Gospel according to Saint Luke. Beginning with the 26th verse. 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 "a 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. This is the word of the Lord.

Congregation: Thanks be to God. (organ music) (choir singing hymns) (organ music) (choir singing hymns) (organ music) (choir singing hymns)

- Twice within a 200-year period on the shores of the cruel and beautiful Mediterranean a man was called, during his lifetime, the son of God. The first was named Octavius. Octavius Caesar, born to one of Rome's most noble and powerful families. He was called the son of God because he had been so successful at ruling the empire with an iron fist, like God. At subduing all of Rome's subjugated nations and improving the economy. And so the poet Virgil called him *filius Dei*, son of God and after he died he was known simply as God. The second man to be so acclaimed was named simply Jesus, and he was born at the very bottom rung of Palestinian society, born to poor peasant parents. They called him, some, after he died the son of King David but that could never hide Jesus' humble origins. And therein I think lies our problem with Christmas.

Today's scriptures are about kings, but they're about very different kinds of kings. The first lesson is about mighty King David, the greatest of all of Israel's kings. King David has now subdued his enemies and things are at last at peace and so King David in a magnanimous mood decides to go on a great royal building program. He says, "Is it right that I dwell in this fine palace of cedar but the almighty God of Israel dwells in a tent, a portable tabernacle?" And so he announces a great royal building program to build God a great temple of cedar. "Surely God will be flattered" he says to the prophet. After all, a capital city ruled over by such a wise and powerful king, ought to have a temple to show its relationship with God. To show the world that God and King David are tight. The response of God is a shock. God tells King David that he's been quite content to dwell in a tabernacle, a tent. He has no need of a house of cedar, in fact God tells King David, "I am not mighty because I live in a grand palace. I am who I am because of the people whom I make. I made you, I made you king I gave you your palace, I gave you everything you have. Would you presume to build a house for me?" This God will not be some tamed house pet of a God for the King of Israel, this God is large, uncontainable, on the move, this God will come and go as he pleases. Not at our bidding, this God won't be contained by us or our mighty kings. And in a way this conversation between God and King David is a wonderful prelude to today's gospel, that beautiful, beloved story of the nativity in Luke. 'Cause when we talk about important matters we usually follow the same order as the readings this morning. We always start by talking about large, important, powerful people. Just like today's lessons we start by talking about King David. What is King David doing this morning up in the palace in Jerusalem? What new public works projects has King David announced to juice up the economy? We read this morning's newspaper and there you will see headlines about large important people with important names in important places like London or Moscow or Washington. When we begin important matters that's the way we began with important people living in important places. This is the way we define power, this is the way we expect kings to act. But then we read the second lesson from Luke's gospel and we realize that we are face-to-face with a very different way of discussing what's important. Note that we are not in Washington or Moscow, we're out in Galilee, a dusty little forgotten corner of the world in a place called Nazareth. God's people had been anticipating a new king to come into their world. Scholars at the university in the Department of Religion have been pouring over the sacred scriptures, seeking, groping for some text to say when this king will come and where and who. Wise men in the East have been scouring the heavens, looking for some sign of this great king. And then there's a flutter of wings and the messenger Gabriel is sent Earthward with an announcement from God. And where does that angel Gabriel go? To a town in Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin, engaged to a man whose name was Joseph. Now we know Washington, and we know Rome but who knows Nazareth? And we know Caesar, we've heard of Octavius, Augustus. But who is this Mary and who is this Joseph? You see we think like King David. We expect if we're going to meet God, we will meet God up at the temple, in the capital city among the learned and the powerful and the famous. But Luke says that's not the way God did things, does things. 'Cause our God appears to come among people like us, in places like here. If God chose to make an entrance into the world in a place like Nazareth, among people like Mary and Joseph, then there's hope that God might come among us in Durham. And when you think about it, isn't that really true to your own experience of how God comes to you? I know that there are some of you this morning who really have had the proverbial mountaintop experience. There on a high mountain, overlooking the valley. There on the rim of the Grand Canyon at sunset, you felt God. Or maybe it was in some grand cathedral in some grand and glorious place like this one. But I suspect that most of you could testify that God has met you in much more ordinary, everyday circumstances. Not in the words of some

famous eloquent preacher but rather in the words of a kind friend who knew just what to say at the right moment when you were going through a tough time. Or not on the face of the rim of the Grand Canyon but in the face of a child looking up in delight. Or in the simple clasp of a mother's hand. We shouldn't be surprised that the angel Gabriel wasn't sent to Washington or Moscow, sent though to Nazareth bringing glad tidings to ordinary Mary and everyday Joseph. And here is a gospel truth we've got to learn over and over again: we who have been waiting for Emmanuel, for God with us the coming of the king of kings, lord of lords. We sing hymns as we started this morning, praying for the advent of God into our lives. But maybe God comes among us in ways so ordinary and everyday that we're apt to miss it. We're apt to miss the wonder of God standing beside us right now here. We, like King David, think we've got to build God some grand and glorious house. Some huge theological construction that gets it all tied down and built and big and contained. We gotta get God fixed so that we can pick up the phone whenever we're in the mood. But no, this God is peripatetic, on the move, more comfortable in a tent than in a temple, elusive, free. And Christmas says this great God freely chose to come here. And so for the time being, in these few days before Christmas I'd like you to go out of church pondering these words of the angel Gabriel to Mary, "Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you." The Lord is with you, you while you're running errands or baking cookies or taking gifts or visiting friends. You typing at the computer in your office, you waiting on customers at the store. This God is free, free to go and to come in your life sometimes when you least expect him, maybe even sometimes when you least want him. Not willing to be the tamed, house pet of kings and empires, this God is free to be with someone like you. The Lord is with you. And not up at the top, up at the White House with kings and princes but at your house with you. Not on cloud nine, not up in Washington but here in Galilee in Durham. The Lord is with you. This says our paradigmatic story, this is the way this God does business. Favoring ordinary people like Mary and Joseph, or you or me in places like Nazareth or here. In him all of our definitions of power and what's important and significant get rearranged, turned upside-down, refocused, changed. After the emissary of the great king showed up in Nazareth, get ready for him to show up anywhere, even here. Saying, "Greetings O favored one, the Lord is with you." After centuries and centuries of trying because we could never climb up so high as to get up to God. God climbed down to be with us here. Christmas means more than finding a baby in a stable. It's about our being found by God here. It was Father's Day at the school, a day when the teacher had invited the fathers to come see their children's classroom. It was something the teacher had thought of to try to get fathers more involved in their children's activities and education. But sadly the whole thing was a failure, the world being what it is. Few fathers had found the time to come and so the teacher decided to go around the classroom and simply ask each child what his or her father did for a living. And the first child got up and said, "My father is at the courthouse, downtown "the great courthouse, he's a lawyer." And the second said, "My father is also downtown, "he owns a very large store and he's working there now." And the third child said, "My father's a pharmacist "and he's helping people fill their prescriptions." And so it went on in this wealthy, suburban classroom until it came the turn of the little boy who's father was not socially prominent in business or professions. And the little boy stood up and he looked over at his father standing in the back of the classroom. And he didn't know what to say but then he brightened and he said, "My daddy, my daddy is, well he's right here." Before these simple words "my daddy is here" all the worlds of social prominence, power and they just evaporate. Before the blessing of presence, standing beside us, nothing else is like it. So Mary says, "I am blessed among women. "The world holds no power over me anymore, "my God is here." Greetings O favored ones, the Lord is with you. (organ music) (choir singing)

Debra: The Lord be with you.

Congregation: And also with you.

- Let us pray, you may be seated. O Lord our God, the author and giver of life in all that is good. We thank you for your mercies and for your presence with us in the everyday common places of our lives. How amazing that we worship a God who is Emmanuel, God with us. Like Mary our souls magnify the Lord and our spirits rejoice in God our savior for you have looked with favor upon our lowliness and we like Mary and Elizabeth are blessed. As we sit here in the opulence and beauty of this house of worship we are mindful that you are the God who is not contained in any house. Forgive us for those times when we try to control the where and the when you are available. For the ways we have tried to limit who has access to you and how your favor can be secured. We are those who have strived to be people of power and prestige yet you call us to be the lowly. We have filled ourselves with ideas and things of the world but you call us to be emptied. Lord empty our thoughts of all but your thoughts. Empty our desires of all but your desires. Empty our lives of all but your life. Empty our hopes of all but your hope. Lord in your mercy, come.

All: O come Emmanuel.

- As you call us to be the lowly and the empty. So you call us to care for the lowly and empty around us. At the Christmas season, which has come to stand for family, peace, hope and love. We pray especially for those who are suffering the loss of family. Whether through divorce or death or estrangement. Give them your comfort, Lord in your mercy, come.

All: O come Emmanuel.

- We pray for those who are victims of violence who know no peace. We remember especially the families of Jamal Elliot and Michael Segroves. We pray for those who have lost loved ones to violence and for those who have turned to guns as a means of empowerment. Teach us all a better way to peace. Lord in your mercy, come.

All: O come Emmanuel.

- We pray for those who are in despair, whether through lost jobs or relationships or health. There are so many things in life that can cause us to lose hope. Yet you are the God who brings a way out of no way. Give us your hope, Lord in your mercy, come.

All: O come Emmanuel.

- We pray for those who are without the safety net of friends and family; for the immigrant and the homeless; for victims of domestic abuse and child abuse. Help us become a community that catches those who are without a net. Teach us anew to love one another. Lord in your mercy, come.

All: O come Emmanuel.

- Lord these are only a few of the prayers we would lift up to you. You know the unspoken prayers that fill our hearts. We name these before you. Lord in your mercy, come.

All: O come Emmanuel.

- In Jesus Christ you have also given us an intercessor to pray on our behalf. The prayers that you would pray for us. We listen to what you pray for us this day. Lord in your mercy, come.

All: O come Emmanuel.

- For the gift these prayers and your many mercies have given to us. We give you thanks, Emmanuel, God with us, amen. Let us offer ourselves and our gifts to the Lord who is with us. (congregation stirring) (organ music) (choir singing) (congregation stirring) (upbeat organ music) ♪ I saw three ships come sailing in ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day ♪ ♪ I saw three ships come sailing in ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day in the morning ♪ ♪ And what was in those ships all three ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day ♪ ♪ And what was in those ships all three ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day in the morning ♪ ♪ Our savior Christ and his lady ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day ♪ ♪ Our savior Christ and his lady ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day in the morning ♪ ♪ Pray wither sailed those ships all three ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day ♪ ♪ Pray wither sailed those ships all three ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day in the morning ♪ ♪ Oh, they sailed in to Bethlehem ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day ♪ ♪ Oh, they sailed in to Bethlehem ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day in the morning ♪ ♪ And all the bells on Earth shall ring ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day ♪ ♪ And all the bells on Earth shall ring ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day in the morning ♪ ♪ And all the angels in Heaven shall sing ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day ♪ ♪ And all the angels in Heaven shall sing ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day in the morning ♪ ♪ And all the souls on Earth shall sing ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day ♪ ♪ And all the souls on Earth shall sing ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day in the morning ♪ ♪ Then let us all rejoice, amain ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day ♪ ♪ Then let us all rejoice, amain ♪ ♪ On Christmas Day in the morning ♪ (organ music) (choir harmonizing hallelujah) Let us pray. Lord with us, for your love, protection and guidance we give you thanks. In gratitude we bring the work of our hands for your blessing. May all the efforts supported by these offerings carry forward your vision for the world. Accomplish through these gifts and our efforts that which is impossible by human design alone. That there may be peace, hope and love throughout the world. Unite us as a family of faith, as we pray together. Our Father

All: Who art in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not in to temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, amen. (organ music) (choir and congregation singing hymns)

- And now may the love, the joy and the peace born into our world in the child Bethlehem be born in your life today and always, amen. (organ music) (choir singing) (intense organ music)