**Preaching Notes for the Eighth Sunday After Pentecost**

**(July 19, 2015)**

**The Rev. Dr. Dawn Chesser**

[**2 Samuel 7:1-14a**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=211#hebrew_reading)

So this week we’ve come to the point in David’s story when things are starting to settle down. The northern and the southern portions of the kingdom have united into one strong nation. Israel has seized the Promised Land from invaders and managed to defeat any Philistines that remained within her borders. The Ark of the Covenant, which houses the presence of the Lord, has come home to Jerusalem. And our King, David, the star of the story, has built himself a nice, comfortable house in which to live. So what now?

Well, it appears that, oddly enough, David finds himself a little uncomfortable with the situation. Think about it. David has always been a nomad—traveling around from place to place—and now, all of a sudden, he’s got it all: a kingdom, a palace to live in, peace and prosperity. What do you do next, when things have finally settled down and you’ve gotten comfortable in your home and in your work? Oddly, this is just exactly what appears to be bothering David.

I understand this a little bit. As an itinerant United Methodist minister, I’ve lived a somewhat nomadic life myself as an adult. I’ve been on the move since I was eighteen years old. The longest I’ve been anywhere in my adult life was six and a half years in Algonquin, Illinois. That seemed like a long time to me.

I’ve noticed that my nomadic lifestyle has created some peculiar tendencies.

First, I’ve become very attached to my furniture. Some people are attached to their houses. I have not had much control over the houses I have lived in, because for most of my life, I have lived in parsonages. But my furnishings that go along with me endure. I surround myself with my belongings, and this provides some consistency from place to place. I have collected furniture from both of my grandparents, so some of my belongings go back to my childhood memories. It comforts me to have things in my life that remind me of my roots.

I have a dining room table that was built for my family by a friend as a gift when my second child was born. Sitting at that table reminds me of all of the people who have joined me for a dinner party or a holiday meal in all the places I have lived over the years. When I sit down at that table, I can see their faces and hear their laughter in my memories; and I am reminded of all the friendships God has brought to my life over the years.

Second, I depend on moves to clean and purge. When you move every three or four years, you have the opportunity to really clean house and get rid of lots of stuff, organize everything, and put things in order. Some of you who are reading these words have probably just gone through this process, so you know what I mean!

What I’m finding now, after having been in my current home (the first house I’ve ever owned) for nearly five years, is that I need to find a way to clean and organize regularly on my own. I should not depend on moving as the only opportunity to purge my house of items we don’t use.

The third thing is that I start to get a little stir-crazy after about five years. I start feeling strongly that I need to make a change. Because as a nomad, I just can’t be comfortable staying in one spot. Moving around all the time is the way I live, the way I dream. And of course, there are variations on this theme.

Sometimes my need for change can be satisfied by buying something new, or rearranging the furniture, or painting a room, or taking on a new project. Making a small change helps me imagine myself and my future in a different way or in a new place.

Some people do what I do in a slightly different form. They remodel or redecorate, or they move to a larger or fancier house in the same community. Some make some other kind of life change. They find a new church, or find a new spouse, or have another baby. Other people start new hobbies, or travel to exotic destinations, or go back to school or change professions.

Of course, there are those who don’t have this problem and who are perfectly content to stay in one place for a lifetime. It is less common nowadays than it used to be. I don’t know what it would be like to be settled in one place. I can’t imagine.

Like so many of us, the people of the ancient world were always on the move. They were nomads, constantly moving from place to place in order to find a little green grass to feed their flocks, a little water to grow some wheat, and little land on which to pitch their tents. The Israelites, the Philistines, the Edomites, the Canaanites—they were all nomadic people. The whole idea of having a kingdom, of owning a portion of land and calling it your own and settling there for a long, long time, just wasn’t part of their lifestyle.

So this idea of being a nation, of having land, of developing political and social structures and governing a people, is something of a new concept for the people of Israel. It’s no wonder that David is a little uncomfortable. If I start to get squirmy after only a few years, I can imagine what David must have felt! So what does David do? He thinks, “I’ve got it all. What to do now?”

And his next thought is, “Wow. I’m settled, I’m comfortable, I’ve got this really nice home to live in, and the Lord God is still in a tent. I should build a really nice, big house—a temple—for God to live in. I’ve moved up. God needs to move up too.”

What a great idea!

You know, that’s exactly what churches do. They get settled, they get comfortable, they get into a groove, and the people start to get bored, ansy, stir-crazy. So all good pastors know exactly what to do when this happens: start a building campaign! Start raising money! Get everyone motived to do an addition, build a new sanctuary, add an education wing! That’ll get everybody moving along in the same direction!

So David went to his trusted friend and confidant, the prophet Nathan, and told him his big idea. And Nathan said, “Great, David! Go for it!” But then, that night, the Lord came to Nathan, maybe in a dream, maybe in a vision. The text doesn’t say exactly how. It just says the Word of the Lord came to Nathan that very night.

And the Lord said, “Go and tell my servant David: Hey, what do you think you are doing? Did I ask you to build me a big fancy house? What makes you think I want to settle in one spot? Haven’t I been on the move, present and living among the people of Israel all these years? Have I ever said, ‘Why don’t you people ever build me a temple to live in?’ No, no, no, David. This is not for you. Your son can build me a house. You already have a job. You are to build a different kind of house. You are the one I have chosen to tend my flock, to shepherd my people. I have given you a land on which to live, and you are now enjoying a respite from your enemies, but I am here to tell you that the solution you are seeking isn’t for you to build me a big, fancy house. In fact, I’m going to make YOU a house, but not the kind of house you are thinking of. And what will be important about your house will be the people who live in it, not some fancy building. Your house will not be a physical structure of brick and mortar. Your house will be a dynasty. I want you to bear a line of ancestors. The house of David, which will be established in my name, and which will endure forever.”

Christians have read the last lines of this Scripture lesson through the particular lens of Jesus Christ. We see him as the one who has a special father-son relationship with the Lord, the one who suffered, the one God has chosen, the one through whom a new kingdom was established, a kingdom that is open to all who believe, and not just to the house of David and the ancestral line of Israel. So this is something really different, not just for David, but for Israel. There is not just a physical shift, but a theological shift that comes with this move. They have moved from being a nomadic people to being a people with a Promised Land. They have moved from being a people bound by covenant to being people bound by place and land. They have moved from being a people wandering with God to a powerful kingdom.

These are big moves and big changes, not just in thinking, but in priorities.

You and I get awfully attached to our land, our houses, our things, and our places, don’t we? So much so that we really can’t conceive of life without them. Homelands, natural resources, assets, power, kingdoms: these are things over which people go to war and are willing to die to keep. And yet, God seems to be saying, “Hey, having a particular house, a particular space, a particular land to call your own, isn’t of first and foremost importance. Yes, it is important. And some day your son can build me a temple. But what really matters, what really counts in this life, isn’t just houses or spaces or land. What is really important is your relationship with God and with God’s people.”

If only we could remember that. If only we could remember that no matter how long we’ve been somewhere, or how much we think something belongs to us, the truth is, we are all nomads on this earth.

Every single one of us is just passing through. We are, as the writer of Hebrews puts it, “sojourners in a strange land, who have nothing else to live by, save the promises of God.” We ought to really try to listen when the writer of Hebrews says of Abraham that he was "staying for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise."

That writer certainly must have had in mind this text from Second Samuel. And he understood it what God was trying to say to David. He clearly understood that the only right and proper foundation for a stable community that we have is that we are heirs of the promise God made to David and to his house.

It was those who didn’t listen to God and who started thinking it was important to claim a piece of land for their own so they could build big fancy houses who got us off on the wrong path. And look where that’s gotten us! We are forever fighting over who is the rightful owner of this or that piece of property. That’s why lawyers are so rich! That’s why governments rise and fall.

The truth is that all of us are really just nomads, passing strangers, foreigners, and wayfarers on this earth. All of these lands we fight for and die for, lands we supposedly own and control, the buildings that seem so important, the houses where we live and work and play and worship, are forever changing hands, being thrown up and torn down, rearranged and remodeled. They are really nothing but tents in the long run, temporary dwelling places.

Come to think of it, our very bodies are only temporary dwelling places, aren’t they?

From the time that we are born to the time we die, our bodies are changing. Did you know that every seven years or so, every cell in your body, except for bone cells and brain cells, is replaced? None of us are living in the same bodies we had seven years ago. We are really nomads, even in our own bodies. They themselves are only tabernacles, tents, temporary dwelling places.

As I read these stories—the history of David’s rise, and the rise of Israel from being a group of nomads to becoming a nation—and I consider what is happening in that very land today, a land where this question of who the land belongs to, who has the right to occupy, control, and defend it—I can’t help but think that the move from understanding ourselves as fundamentally nomads to understanding ourselves as landowners wasn’t really a move UP.

It is this move that has been, in my mind, at the center of human destruction throughout history. If we didn’t own the land, we wouldn’t think it was ours to even put up a house, and then a bigger house, and then a palace.

If we understood that our first priority was to be God’s family, to be brothers and sisters around the globe who all share this planet that was created by God and that belongs to God and that never was and never will be ours, then maybe we’d be able to stop all this destruction and killing in the name of God.

If only we could hear God saying these words and not think of a physical space to occupy and own, but rather, of the household of the family of God, the heirs of this promise to David, then, we just might make it:

“When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.”

[**Ephesians 2:11-22**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=211#epistle_reading)

Again this week the lesson from the Epistle is most likely an early Christian hymn. What did the early church sing about? They sang about the possibility of peace and reconciliation that was now available to the whole world through Christ. In this hymn, we have word pairs showing the contrast between “then,” the time before Jesus came into the world, and “now.”

* Then they were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel
* Then they were strangers to the covenant
* Then they had no hope
* Then they were without God in the world
* Then they had no access to the Father
* Now they have been brought near
* Now both groups are one
* Now the dividing wall is gone
* Now the hostility is no longer
* Now they are all a new humanity through him, one body, reconciled to God, with Christ himself as their cornerstone

These are powerful words and images for us to hear today. They point us to our eternal hope that one day there will be peace on earth and good will toward all people. One day, there will no longer be categories of people signaling division: no longer slave or free, woman or man, Gentile or Jew or Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist, straight or gay, black or white or yellow or brown. One day, some day, the peace that is in Christ will reign.

We need to sing this hymn of hope in our world today, because we live in a world that is all about walls and barriers, insiders and outsiders, privileged and unprivileged. In some places, such as the holy lands of Israel and Palestine, there are literal, physical walls that separate the Palestinians from the Jews.

What walls, invisible or physical, are in your community? Can you talk about the separations? Can you look beyond the more obvious signals such as skin color, class, and religion and talk about the barriers in your community or your congregation that hold people back from becoming fully a part of the neighborhood, the classroom, the Sunday School group, or the church? What can you do to begin to tear down those walls in the name of Jesus Christ?

[**Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=211#gospel_reading)

After John the Baptist’s sudden and brutal death at the hands if Herod, his followers had taken John’s body and buried it, and then had gone to share the painful news with Jesus. Jesus was understandably devastated. So he said, “Let’s get away from all this for a while and go to a deserted place where we can have some time to deal with this terrible turn of events together.”

Unfortunately, the crowds of people who were following Jesus around, looking for his teaching and his healing, would not leave them alone to grieve. So Jesus and his disciples got into a boat and tried to get away that way. Still, the crowds persisted. They saw where Jesus and his disciples were headed , so they all proceeded on foot so they could be there, waiting for him when he landed on the other side of the lake.

What we find out is that even though Jesus needed to get away and deal with his grief, even though he was no doubt exhausted and in despair, when he got out of the boat and saw the crowds who had come all that way to be healed by him, he couldn’t turn them away.

Even though he was tired and weak and didn’t have much left to give, still he reached deep and sat down with the crowds and began to heal. He healed people until night fell, at which point his disciples, trying to care for their teacher and friend, said, “Come on, Jesus. It’s late. Send them away. Tell them it is time for a dinner break and send them into town so you can have a little time to yourself and they can get something to eat.”

What did Jesus do? Well, he didn’t give in and send the crowds away. He reached even deeper and said, “Listen, guys, these people are hungry, you are right. But don’t send them away. You give them something to eat. And the disciples said, “How are we supposed to feed all these folks? Do you have two hundred denarii so we can go buy them some bread?”

Now the lectionary skips over the next part of the story, but what happened at that point was that Jesus took the five loaves of bread and the two fish that they had and ordered his disciples to start handing it out. Miraculously there was enough for everyone. Mark says about 5000 people were fed, and they even had some left over at the end.

So after Jesus and his disciples did all this, they were even more exhausted. Mark tells us that Jesus said farewell to the crowds and went up on a mountain to pray while the disciples went ahead in the boat. While they were out there on the water, there came a terrible storm. The disciples were afraid, but suddenly Jesus appeared, walking on water, and once again he reached deep and gave of himself to them, calming not just his disciples’ fears, but also the winds and rains.

It was at this point the lesson for today picks back up and we find the disciples coming ashore in Gennaseret after a very long couple of days followed by a very long and terrifying night. And once again, when they get out of the boat, they are met with crowds of people waiting for Jesus to heal them. They had brought their sick and their lame, and word spread quickly throughout the region that the healer Jesus was passing through, and wherever he went, in villages and cities and farms and marketplaces, the people brought their sick to him; and he healed them.

So that’s the context that helps us to see that Jesus repeatedly calls upon himself and his disciples, and indeed, each one of us, to reach deeper, to try harder, to take even our weakest points and whatever limitations we think we have and keep pushing, even when we are tired, even when things are going badly, even when we think we just can’t go on.

Jesus’ call is to see beyond what we think we can do as mere human beings and reach for something greater: to have the faith that God can make us able not to just persevere, but to do more than we could ever do on our own. It’s sort of like that old saying, “That which doesn’t kill us can make us stronger.”

People say that God never gives us more than we can handle, but some days it feels like we’ve been given a lot to handle. How do we deal with it? Do we just give up and let ourselves become accustomed to these things happening? Do we just accept that there isn’t anything we can do? Do we admit defeat and stop bothering to try to make things better?

I am so tired of it all, I have to confess that I might be tempted to do just that, and I’m sure that’s what lots of people do. They just give up even trying. Don’t watch the news. Don’t talk about our sins as individuals or as a society. Don’t take responsibility. Just look the other way.

Global warming? No, human beings don’t have anything to do with that. Or even worse: yes, we are probably responsible but it’s too late anyway so we might as well just go ahead and have a good time, blow up our mountains to mine coal, continue our dependency on oil until it runs out, pollute the air and water, destroy the ozone layer that protects life on earth, use up our natural resources. It’s only a matter of time, so we might as well enjoy our lifestyles for as long as possible.

Never mind that we are leaving behind a damaged planet for our children and our children’s children. We dealt with our problems, and they can deal with theirs. Yes, that is one attitude we could take. We could just say, “That’s life. I give up. Bad things happen ,and we can’t do anything about it. It’s every man for himself.”

Discrimination? No, racist attitudes don’t have anything to do with the repeated incidences of shooting of African Americans by police, or the massacre of African Methodist Episcopal Bible Study attendees in Charleston, South Carolina. White American Christians could dismiss it all as coincidence and continue to sit quietly by and do nothing about the prevalence of Confederate flags in their state capital buildings and adorning cars and trucks in their neighborhoods.

We could do that. We could take that attitude. We could be like the disciples and say, “Come on, let’s just go and hide. Let those people take care of themselves, and we will take care of ourselves, Jesus. We are tired, you are tired, and there are always more and more people wanting things from us. Come on, Jesus. Let’s run away from all of this and take care of ourselves.”

But Jesus says no. Jesus says we have to keep trying, even when we feel like giving up, even when we don’t think there is anything more we can do to fix the problems, even when we have very little left to give.

Jesus shows us by his own actions that giving up is not an option if we are to be his followers. We must not ever give up. In fact, we’ve got to do the opposite of simply giving up. We’ve got to dig in deeper and try even harder, turn our biggest weaknesses into our greatest assets. And I believe we can. I believe that if we all work together, put aside our differences, our desire to find someone or something to blame, and instead focus our time and energy on helping one another, trusting one another, and working hard to take care of the many resources that God has provided for us, we can turn things around, not just for ourselves, but for all of God’s people and for all the generations to come.

Maybe if we did a better job with that there wouldn’t be so many deeply disturbed people out there who are obviously sick but whose problems get ignored to the point that they become capable of walking into movie theaters and elementary schools and churches and shooting innocent people.

We can’t just look the other way when we see people who are sick, who are hurting and lost and angry and who are showing clear signs that they are in trouble and in need of help. They are all around us. We see them every day. What do we do? Do we ignore them, look the other way, refuse to help? Are we tempted to give up because the problems are so overwhelming, or because we think someone else will take care of it?

I think this Scripture tells us that it’s okay to admit we are tired and need to take a rest sometimes, a little time to grieve and pray and renew, but we can’t rest for long. We’ve got to get back out there to the work of feeding the multitudes, healing the sick, taking care of our planet and all of the creatures that inhabit it. Because it isn’t ours. This world we live in belongs to God, and we are God’s chosen stewards.

And folks, God’s many hungry people can’t wait too long for us to get our act together before they are fed!

* They are hungry NOW!
* They are sick NOW!
* They are being oppressed NOW!
* They are feeling powerless NOW!
* They need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ NOW!

They need to believe that Jesus and those who call themselves his followers are not going to leave them alone to fend for themselves. They need to believe that God has a vision for this world that we cannot fully see. They need to hear about a new vision that is powerful and strong and life-changing. They need to learn the good news that Jesus can heal, that things can get better, that God can make all things new again.