

Sermon by the Rector
December 21, 2008 – the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year B

[2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16](#)

[Canticle 15](#)

[Luke 1: 26-38](#)

God denies David permission to build a temple, for two reasons:

- 1) because God doesn't live in buildings, but in a tent, accompanying his people in their wanderings; this reflects the people's practice in the wilderness, of carrying the ark of the covenant, the tablets of the Law, from place to place under a tent
- 2) because David has a pretty big head already, and might become overwhelmingly enamored of himself if he succeeds in erecting the first temple.

Later, of course, David's son Solomon builds a temple. In the course of time, the Babylonian armies overrun Jerusalem and destroy Solomon's temple. Some 70 years later, exiles returning from Babylon undertake to re-build it. As Zerubbabel, the leader of this group, lays the foundation stone, the prophet Zechariah cries out, "Blessed are those who have despised the day of small things!" Something big is starting here; those who scorned half-measures are vindicated.

Zechariah's cry puts me in mind of Daniel Burnham, an architect and planner who played a major role in the building of the modern city of Chicago around the turn of the 20th century. Burnham's motto: "Make no small plans". Though it isn't, it could be the city's motto. Everything in Chicago, from expressways to airports to buildings to parks, evidences big plans, big visions.

Our whole nation seems to be in Zechariah mode right about now. We're looking for big plans, big projects, big actions and big gestures, i.e., an economic stimulus now projected to approach one trillion – that's "trillion" with a "t".

A preference for bold gesture and comprehensive action has always characterized the U.S. Huge undertakings, from canals like the one right next to Grace, to railroads, to World War II, to the interstate highway system, to the two – not one, but two – invasions that constituted our response to the 9/11 attacks: these get our juices flowing and our energy focused.

And this infatuation with big plans defines personal aspirations too. It's one of the underlying causes of the housing meltdown. People wanted to do something big for themselves and their families, to provide a house where the whole clan could come for gatherings and where everyone would have plenty of room to move. More house than we need? That's thinking small.

And who among us has not nurtured some pretty big dreams for ourselves, at least when we were young. I wanted to be a U.S. Senator after I read the kids' version of Profiles in Courage, when I was about 8, and the fact that my family were Democrats in a Republican town dissuaded me not at all. When I got to Chicago and learned more about what you have to do to realize political ambitions, I lowered my sights a little, but it took a really big city to make my plans get smaller.

Here's the problem: details, where both the devil and God reside. Details get in the way of big plans, and ignoring them exacts a cost.

We didn't think too much about details – history, culture, class and religious divisions, boring, academic stuff – when we invaded Afghanistan, and even less so when we invaded Iraq. Our apparent disinterest in such things left the learning process to aid workers, reporters, contractors, and most of all, to soldiers, who sometimes learned about the details of Afghan and Iraqi society at the cost of life or limb.

Many people didn't think too much about details – "adjustable rate", for instance – when they pursued their big dreams of big houses. They learned the meaning of phrases like this in very painful ways.

Sometimes we overlook important details as we nurture and pursue our own aspirations. We assume people important to us are on board with our big plans, but we don't always take the time and effort to really find out. Families have come apart because someone overlooked this kind of detail.

I don't believe God condemns our penchant for big plans. After all, everything in our hearts – including ambition – comes from God, and our bold gestures might even be said to represent an effort to imitate God. A President-elect who wasn't thinking about implementing an immense stimulus right now would be derelict in his duty.

Nor do I think God frowned on the ambitious undertakings of Solomon and Zerubbabel, the builder and chief re-builder of the temple.

How interesting, though, that as God looked down with some pleasure on the edifice rising on Mount Zion and the efforts of the laborers building it, the divine sight was also focused on a little detail which had not yet even come into existence. God was looking at Nazareth, a small and unimportant town in the backwater region of Galilee, and anticipating the birth there of a poor peasant girl named Mary. God intended that she should herself be the temple, the place where the fullness of God would be pleased to dwell. Centuries after Zerubbabel's work was complete, God send the angel Gabriel to announce this plan.

This fourth Sunday of Advent summons our hearts and minds to the details where God dwells in a special way. The devil's there, too, because it's in our attention or inattention to what seems tedious, negligible or unworthy of being taken into account that big plans

come to fruition, or don't. Big things depend on little ones. God picked Mary to teach us this lesson. She's managed to hold our attention for twenty centuries.