

I don't know if this movie still shows up on TV, but for several reasons it will always have a warm spot in my heart. I think Henry Mancini was one of the finest of movie soundtrack composers, and influenced some others, and what can one say about Audrey Hepburn, let alone Albert Finney. The movie is told as a series of automobile trips through Europe involving different stages of the meeting, romance, and marriage between the two main characters, starting when they were poor and struggling and traveling with back packs and — happy! — to when they were rich and successful and driving a Mercedes and, well, had been unfaithful, had lost their more-or-less “spiritual” character. In other words, moving from hitchhiking to driving a Mercedes did not make them a more loving couple. It's sort of a parallel to the history we encounter in the Old Testament.

But one of the reasons it has a warm spot is that my late wife, Carol, and I saw it in a sneak preview back when I was in law school and a year or two after we had returned from spending a year in England that we ended with a not-quite-three-week automobile trip through Europe at what corresponded at a time in our lives with, at best, the second earliest of Hepburn and Finney's trips, their's in an old MG, ours in a VW.

But oh, how times changed between the mid-1960's when we first drove European roads, and our last such trips in the 1990's. In the 1960's, even though some English owned small trailers called “caravans,” many Europeans did not even have cars, and cars were about all we saw on the European roads. Thirty years later, shortly before I entered seminary in 1995, we drove amidst what seemed like an endless caravan of, well, “caravans,” though largely bearing Dutch license plates, campers being towed north as the summer vacation period ended.

Campers, “caravans,” mini-houses on wheels, “houses” not confined to one specific location, but able to go wherever their owners want them to go. Some of you have these now, and many of our snow birds reside in versions of these when they are with us.

The ancient Hebrews traveling in their Exodus from Egypt did not have wheeled vehicles, at least not if Cecil B. DeMille and Charlton Heston gave us an accurate picture. Presumably they stayed in tents, and what sufficed for their place of worship — a place where they felt in some sense God made God's self physically present — was transportable, a tent, that is what the term *tabernacle* in the Old Testament is about. And to the extent that in, addition to an understanding of God, the Bible gives us some history of these ancients, that tent, their center of worship, their “church,” at least their church sanctuary, was something that would travel.

But, well, humans are humans and generally mean well, but at times I suspect we are a bit dense. In our Lectionary readings from the Hebrew Bible we are in a series of stories about David, the great king of 3000 plus years ago. I did a sermon mentioning David and Goliath a few weeks ago; last week, at St. Michael's, Carol Hosler was able to use one of my favorite pairings of readings, David's dancing almost naked as the Ark of the Covenant was carried into Jerusalem, and Salome's dancing — almost naked — and ending up asking for and receiving the head of John the Baptizer. Today's readings are not nearly so adult nor scandalous nor violent, involving instead the prophet Nathan. When David comes to him about building a “house for God,” a more permanent place in which God could be present than that second millennium BC version of a camper, than that tent, the *tabernacle*. David thought he should build a *house* for God.

Our reading tells how God came to Nathan in a dream and instructed him to go to the King and talk David out of this idea. Today's passage, according to my favorite source on such things, Richard Elliott Friedman, was written by the person those of us who believe in the “Source Theory” of the earliest books of the Hebrew Bible call, “J,” the “Yahwist,” because the name that writer used for God is “Yahweh” (which German scholars spelled with a “J”) — or more specifically, the four Hebrew consonants of that name. This writer liked to engage in word play, and it may well be that the main reason for the story about a “house” for God was to present that the “house” would be the “house of David,” the off-spring of David. Today's reading presents a fifth major covenant in the Old Testament — the promise made to Noah after the Flood, the two

covenants made to Abraham, the so-called “Sinai Covenant” made with Moses, and this promise of a perpetual “House of David”: Israel would always have as king a descendent of David.

But I suspect there is much more here, and let me go a bit further into some Bible Study. We shall see in a few weeks that David’s successor, his son Solomon, ultimately built a Temple, a very grand Temple, to replace the tent. (By the way, the mention of Solomon and a Temple in what Denise read is probably from a later writer, not the Yahwist.) We read in later writings about some other things Solomon did, such as build up an army. Solomon perhaps represents the high water mark, or maybe a descent from the high water mark, of what we call “the United Kingdom” of Israel and Judah. Just as Hepburn’s and Finney’s moving up to a Mercedes did not improve their marriage, moving from a tent to a Temple did not benefit either God or the people of God. After Solomon’s death, the kingdom split into two kingdoms with those names, and in 722 BCE, Assyria wiped out the kingdom of Israel, and only Judah remained, which itself was conquered by Babylon in 589-587 BCE, and became independent again only after Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered Babylon in 539 BCE and freed the Jews captive there. My parishioners hear that history from me often, but I believe one cannot grasp the Old Testament and, indeed, the longing for a Messiah without understanding that the Babylonian conquest and the liberation by Cyrus are central to the theology we find there.

And after the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests, which the prophets and other writers of the Old Testament understood as God’s punishment for the sins of the nations, writers looked back and saw Solomon as *not* such a good guy, largely because of his many — and many non-Jewish — wives and concubines.

These later writers did not so much, however, question the building of the Temple, and, indeed, after Cyrus freed them from Babylon, the Jews rebuilt the Temple, though apparently not so grandly as Solomon had built it. 500 and some years before Christ, they built *a house for God*.

And for more than 1500 years, we Christians have been building such houses; we call them “churches.” Unlike David and the Jews before him with respect to the Tabernacle and the Jews after him, at least for some time, with the Temple, we do *not* think of our own church as the unique place that God may “dwell.” Yet equally misguidedly, we too often think that it is within that physical church that we are, truly, *church*.

Some of our “houses” are really something. Traveling the road in Europe, I have seen some stunners, both while on that very first VW trip and on more recent trips, and not all of these “houses” are old — the *Sagrada Familia* Church in Barcelona by the late Spanish architect, Antoni Gaudi, is spell binding and truly a hymn to God. This building has a rather nice ceiling, as does Community Presbyterian in Coolidge. The sanctuary at St. Michael’s Episcopal in which we worshipped last week strikes me as especially lovely. I think, coming so directly from the Roman Catholic tradition, Episcopalians build fine church buildings, fine “houses.”

But . . . well, for many it may have been your first Episcopalian worship experience. It is certainly a bit more symbol driven than our Calvin and Zwingli toned-down worship. You all noticed the way one young person carried in a very long staff on top of which there is a cross, while another carried in a “book,” which was used later in the service. If you noted that both the Old Testament and Epistle lessons were read from a lectern, you were probably able to conclude from the fact that Carol stepped forward to read from that “book” that was held for her, that the “book” was the Gospel — or the four versions of the Gospel, if you prefer.

What I want to note, however, is that at the close of the service, the young person who carried in the cross on the long staff carried it out, and right behind the cross came the other young person with that “book,” the Gospel, holding it up and walking out from the sanctuary, out from the worship — and, symbolically, out of the “house” and into the world.

And I think maybe what that symbolism represents is something that God was trying to say through Nathan that not only never was passed down to David's successor, but is too readily overlooked by virtually all churches today: a church is not a building! A church is what — who — carries that Cross and Gospel out into the world!

God does not need edifices, God needs edifiers! God does not need us tied to a house; God would prefer quite possibly that we go about in those "houses on wheels," campers, or caravans. God wants us to hit the road, not to hit the road for diversion, but to hit the road so that we can carry Jesus Christ to the world that is outside the walls in which we might worship.

I should add that not long before I first traveled the road in Europe, an Englishman whose last name was "Peter" prescribed something called, "The Peter Principle." One corollary of that principle was that an organization declined once it had adequate facilities. Look at the number of half-filled, heck, one-tenth filled churches, and you will know what "The Peter Principle" means applied to churches.

Which brings me back to Hepburn and Finney and "Two for the Road." Levels of happiness is perhaps the way to characterize their multiple trips represented over the years. Poor and with a two seat car, they were happy; as they became richer, they became more combative and drifted apart and even . . . well, one can imagine. The movie's ending was not sad. Though something — innocence — had been lost, they realized their mistakes.

But do we as Christ's Church realize our mistakes? I think what God was saying to us through Nathan is that God does not need for us to erect walls, but rather would like for us to grasp the symbolism in that Episcopal recessional. God needs us to hit the road carrying high the cross and proclaiming the Gospel outside our "houses," and not just inside.

And when we hit the road in that manner, whether with a backpack or VW or our campers, we are not alone, we are not just “Two for the Road,” we are always accompanied by at least three beside ourselves: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Let’s get out of the house and go do God’s thing.

Amen.