

**Is God here?**  
**Jeremiah 31:7-14 & Matthew 2:1-12**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Christmas, Year B**  
**4 January 2008**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

This is a big day in the life of our parish. We find ourselves in surroundings both familiar and strange. In this very space many of us have broken bread and celebrated with one another on countless occasions. We have laughed and sung; our children have danced and played. And today we see this place transformed, with an altar, pulpit, and reredos, with liturgy and songs of praise uplifted to God in thanksgiving for another new year.

And yet, it is unavoidable that we feel a bit out of place. There are banquet chairs where we are accustomed to pews. The wood, stone, and lantern light that have so marked our holy worship are replaced by drywall and florescence. For the best of all reasons, we have been removed from our church for these nine months (and only nine months, we pray!). But we are still removed, and for those of us so used to meeting God in that holy place, this feels strange. We might ask, “Where is God? Has he moved with us?”

Either by serendipity or grace, both of our readings this morning address these questions. Jeremiah writes at a time when the people of Israel have been scattered by Babylon. The ancient Jews, more than any other people in the world, understood God to inhabit a particular place. God first dwelt in the tabernacle, and when David moved his government to Jerusalem and his son Solomon built the magnificent temple, God dwelt there. In large part, to be a Jew meant to be one who looked to Jerusalem and made regular pilgrimage to *that location* to be near the presence of God. But in Jeremiah’s day the Jews are scattered. Their temple—the very house of God in the most literal sense—is destroyed and they are cast away from Jerusalem into foreign lands. And so *they* ask, “Where is God? Has he moved with us?” It is to such questions that the prophet Jeremiah responds.

Just before today’s reading, Jeremiah says to his confused and discomfited people, “Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found *grace* in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love [says God]; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.”

And in today’s reading Jeremiah adds, “Hear the word of the Lord, O nations...He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd does his flock.”

It is important to note historically that when God leads the Jewish people back to their land, he does direct them in the rebuilding of the temple. In other words, that holy space *is*

important, and God affirms the Jews' reverence of it. But when the Jews are separated from their sacred space, Jeremiah promises, they are not separated from God. God tends them like a shepherd *wherever* they find themselves and with a love that is—in God's own words—everlasting.

Our Gospel reading today is that wonderful story with which we end the Christmas season, the coming of the Magi. Most often we talk about the gifts brought by these wise men to the baby Jesus. But it is equally important to focus upon *where they've come from*, and *who has come with them*.

Scripture tells us that the Magi come “from the East” of Judah, which means in biblical terms “beyond the borders of the known world,” from the mysterious and pagan lands of the Parthians and beyond. It was believed that God did not dwell in such places and among such heathens. And yet, we are told that the Magi are called by the appearance of a guiding star, and in that guidance they are given knowledge that it is the Messiah whom they seek. What is this if not the very presence of God among them? The Methodists would call this “prevenient grace,” that grace of God that finds us even in our confusion and our wilderness and draws us to him. Even beyond the borders of everything we know, God is with us.

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In A.D. 563, St. Columba, an Irish monk, landed on the south shore of the tiny island of Iona. Immediately, Columba and his fellow monks sensed the presence of God on Iona in a way that was unusually potent and palpable. The very energy of God seemed to radiate from the island's stone. Columba built a monastery there, and for centuries people gravitated to Iona in the hopes of meeting God. From the ancient kings of Scotland (including the historical Duncan and MacBeth) to modern day pilgrims (including myself), throngs flock to that holy place.

In 1938, as the world continued in the fevered sickness of economic depression, a Scottish Presbyterian minister named George MacCleod felt called by God to restore the ancient church on Iona, which had fallen into ruin.

By conventional wisdom, MacCleod's was a foolish pursuit. There were so many better things to do, they said, than organize people and raise money to restore an old church. But MacCleod understood that the natural well-spring of God that St. Columba originally had experienced on Iona had been leavened even more by the centuries of prayer offered by countless generations of souls in the abbey. There was something special about that particular place, and it needed to be honored as sacred.

George MacCleod did rebuild Iona Abbey, but as much as he rightly understood and revered the church as a physical place in which God dwells, he also understood something else even more important. MacCleod recognized that though God radiates particularly from the stones on Iona, he is incarnate everywhere. He is known *wherever* people gather to acknowledge him in love and share him with others, in soup kitchens and classrooms, in hospitals and war-torn trenches, and in parish halls converted into worship space.

Even as he presided at the consecration of the restored abbey, MacCleod offered this prayer to God:

**It is not just the interior of these walls, it is our own inner beings you have renewed.  
We are your temple not made with hands.  
We are your body.  
If every wall should crumble, and every church decay, we are your habitation.  
Nearer are you than breathing, closer than hands and feet.  
Ours are the eyes with which you, in the mystery, look out in compassion on the world.  
So we bless you for this place, for your directing of us, your redeeming of us, and your indwelling.  
Take us 'outside the camp', Lord, outside holiness, out to where soldiers gamble, and thieves curse, and nations clash at the cross-roads of the world....  
So shall this building continue to be justified.<sup>1</sup>**

Where is God? He abides in the sacred space of our old church, where he will watch with care as our architects and craftsmen delicately restore the nave this year. He abides with us here in *this* space, as we gather to join our prayers and voices in praise and worship of him. And he abides *in us*. He guides us through the confusion and the wildernesses of our lives, drawing us to him even when we stray beyond the very borders of what we have known. Our eyes are his eyes, our hands his hand, and if we look upon the world with compassion, carrying on the Magi gifts of grace and redemption, then our work in this new year will be justified.

*Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from J. Philip Newell's *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*, pp. 82-3.