

Where Does God Live?

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

Pentecost 14

August 25-26, 2018

1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, and 41-43

Early last week satellites warned of a hurricane headed for Hawaii. It's unusual, so the people were warned to get prepared, as much as people who live on an island can be. Even though Hurricane Lane was down graded to Category 1, it still brought torrential rains that immersed Honolulu in waist deep water. As I was reading about the storm, it struck me how differently people responded. Some bagged their medicine and personal papers and fled their homes, seeking shelter and safety, while others ignored warnings from authorities and plunged into powerful waves at closed beaches. Emergency officials said repeatedly over loud speakers, "Please get out of the water. It's very dangerous."

It seems to me that people respond to other storms differently, too. Political news this past week was stormy. For some Americans, the news was like powerful wind and hard-hitting waves—dangerous and threatening. For others—not so much.

Still, we need to know ... where do we go in a storm? To whom do we listen? Whom do we trust? Who's responsible for our safety and for mayhem?

Last week's reading introduced King Solomon. We meet him now eleven years later, as he dedicates the Temple in Jerusalem, his crowning achievement. Our text for today is Solomon's prayer at the Temple's dedication.

Only the finest building materials were used. The Temple was elaborately decorated with cherubim, palm trees, and flowers. Everything, even the floor, was overlaid with gold. The Temple was magnificent.

The Temple marked a change for the people. Before this, the Ark of the Covenant was kept in the tabernacle, which moved with the people, like a Cloud. But the people were no longer nomads; they were a nation. It seemed right to make a permanent, fixed house for God.

As in the other great narratives of Samuel and David, there is tension in this heavily edited story of dedication.

Where is the Presence of the LORD? Is the divine presence contained or free?

W. Brueggemann wrote that Yahweh's presence is much desired, but "never easy, never obvious and always a problem."

I remember the joyous celebration in 2006 when this fine space was dedicated to the glory of God. Some St. Mark's people remember the building of the first and second places of worship, in 1960 and 1970, here on this corner. No doubt, after each project was completed, there was a dedication.

Still, sometimes people refer to a church building as "God's house." Does it mean that God lives here and we visit God on weekends? Does it mean that God is here and not elsewhere?

The Hebrew Bible has three words for the presence of God. One is dynamic, like an intrusion: "I will come to you," as God said to Moses on Mount Sinai. The most common word is to sojourn: God is present, like a cloud, but free to come and go. The third word, *yashav*, used in our lesson, is the least common. It means to dwell or inhabit in a permanent way, like a king sitting on a throne.

Parts of Solomon's prayer make this final high claim—including some verses left out of today's reading. (It's always good to look at the verses left out!):

Then Solomon said, 'The LORD has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever.' (1 Kings 8:12-13)

This is probably very old liturgy. It states that God, the LORD, is visibly and physically in the Temple. The "thick darkness" refers to the holy of holies, which was windowless and only opened on holy days. The lines read like God, the Creator of the Universe, was in solitary confinement!

But then, in later verses, there is protest to this certainty when Solomon declares:

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I built. (1 Kings 8:27)

The dedication liturgy shifts in tone ... to a different kind of presence and confidence. The great builder Solomon continued seeking a pastoral presence when he asked God to hear the people when they pray: "O hear ... heed and forgive." (1 Kings 8:30)

Cold water is tossed into the high and mighty dedication prayer as it moves to offer an alternative vision! The LORD is present in the Temple ... and to the people watchful, waiting, hearing, and forgiving.

Still, the Presence of God is a problem. Where is Creative Power? Steadfast Love? Who is watching over us? Who listens? Who waits? There are times this is evident and times when we can't see, hear, or feel the LOVE that's been promised.

Early this morning I read of Senator John McCain's death. Last week we read that he had discontinued medical treatment for brain cancer. Upon that announcement, his wife,

Cindy, spoke of her love for him and thanked everyone who has cared for him. Longtime friends responded to the news with deep thanks. Mitt Romney wrote: "...his heroism inspires, his life shapes our character. I am blessed and humbled by our friendship." As Senator McCain's life comes to close, there is love, peace and gratitude.

Just under this article was another story about brain cancer. The caption read, "With lemonade, girl helps her twin brother with brain cancer." The article told the story: "8-year-old Jocelyn is helping her twin brother and has raised \$1,700. Their parents find the positives and sources of optimism. 'We try to focus on the things' we're able to do with him" and "You don't need to be an adult to help out." [1]

But not all hard news, and not all endings, are received with positives and peace. And, certainly, we are not always prepared for whatever comes.

Some news is devastating and hits like a hurricane. We aren't prepared. Stories of abuse, misconduct, crimes, and cover-ups can leave us on shaky ground ... in the church, community, and country. From the cover up of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, to the waves at Willow Creek, to more local issues such as bullying, guns, and drugs. Nationally, we experience ongoing tantrums and turmoil.

We seek a stable structure. A safe place.

These are the times we need a beacon of light, a flicker of hope that the structures we rely on—the church, the community, and the country—can be rebuilt, rehabbed in some way. We need reassurance to be able to trust in strength that will not collapse in a storm.

The Dynasty of David ended in the sixth century with the Babylonian invasion. This magnificent Temple was destroyed, as were the one after that and the one after that.

But the promise and presence of HESED—Steadfast Love—that calls us out and calls us up, waits for us, like the Father of the Prodigal Son. The Divine Dream did not die.

We worship week after week throughout the year as the liturgy and lessons change and we move from season to season. The God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Samuel, David and Solomon, Jesus and Paul encounter us here.

The people before us lived in the tension of God's presence and absence, availability and freedom. They wondered, were they the Chosen People or complete losers? To be human is to struggle between these poles. Humanity is mortal, flawed and full of disasters. Are we worthless wanderers?

On the other hand, in humanity there is unbounded beauty, astounding ability, unlimited possibility. Are we terminally arrogant?

Who are we? Glorious? Or not so much?

The psalmist put it clearly and prayed, “What are we that you should care for us?” (Psalm 144:4, NRSV). And, we are “little less than the angels.” (Psalm 8:5, NLT)

It is God that humanity needs to complete itself. It is knowledge of God that defends us from despair and, at the same time, brings the saving grace of humility that comes with knowing our place in the universe. [2]

God with us makes life possible and our efforts worthwhile. God identifies with us and cares for us ... and came to us as Emmanuel. One who shared life with us. Jesus knows what we're made of and at the same time frees us to be more than we are. Here is the God who saves us from the arrogance of worshipping ourselves and, by having shared in our humanity, makes us glorious at the same time.

Our worship space is bright, open, and inviting. It's sturdy and should last a long time. Yet, as our society becomes more and more secular, worship is becoming less and less important to people. There is so much more that calls for our time and attention. People look elsewhere for identity, purpose, and meaning, and for structure.

Worship at St. Mark's follows the liturgical year, an ancient rhythm that tells the story of Jesus' life, and stories of the Bible. It is central to our life. The liturgical changes reflect the seasons and the time. On September 8th and 9th, the Season of Creation begins again. Christmas and Easter services here are festive and fancy, large and lovely. But it is what happens in the ordinary time that shapes us.

Our daily lives are not full of choirs, trumpets, and candlelight. *It is the way we act ordinarily—not rarely—that defines us.* Daily thoughtfulness, generosity, consideration, and attention matter more in our life together than a big birthday party or expensive Christmas present.

God doesn't need this time of formation; we do. Worship shapes us for the rest of the week. Worship summons us to become what we seek: forgiving, attentive, open minded, compassionate, understanding, speaking up, speaking out, and speaking the truth in love. In this time of community, we become Bread that feeds and hands of peace. Waiting, watching, ready and accepting ... like the LORD to whom Solomon prayed.

Life can be stormy. We aren't always at ease with the hard news that comes our way. And we are certainly not always prepared for whatever comes.

We are mortal and vulnerable, AND we are marvelous and valuable.

Being part of a worshipping community is about learning to live our ordinary lives extraordinarily well. Our faithfulness grounds us in the Presence of the Divine Dream that lives on through us.

Amen.

Resources:

[1] The Daily Herald, August 24, 2018

[2] Chittister, Joan, "The Liturgical Year," page 46

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