

The Dwelling Place of God

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
 Settle our hearts.
 Still our minds.
 And stir our imaginations,
 That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

2 Samuel 7:1-14a

Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.”

But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?”

Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies.

Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. 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.”

Ephesians 2:11-22

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of

the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

The Dwelling Place of God

Where do you find God? Where are you most aware of God's presence?

This question of where we can find God—where we can go when we need to be reminded that there is holiness, goodness, peace in the world—is a question that the biblical narrative struggles with from the very beginning. In the book of Genesis, there is no place where God can reliably be located. Instead, God seems to dip down into the lives of individuals like Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph, showing up in dreams and visions, but never staying long nor stating when the next visit will be. As a result, we often see the matriarchs and patriarchs of the faith struggling to know what to do when God's promises don't appear to be coming true and God seems nowhere to be found. The image of God that results is an image of a God who seems separate from time and space, a God without a dwelling place.

But when the biblical narrative shifts in the book of Exodus from God's interactions with individuals to God's interactions with the community, the question of where God can be found begins to become increasingly urgent. While Moses, having met God in the burning bush, seems to trust that God is present even when not visible, the community of Israelites are not nearly so certain—an invisible God is all well and good if you're the one God talks to, but for those not privy to God's communications, something more is needed.

And so for the first time, we read about God's Dwelling Place—the mountain to which God instructs Moses to lead the people. As Moses climbs Mt. Sinai and the clouds descend, the people interpret the roll of thunder as God speaking with Moses. But when Moses has been gone for too long, the people get nervous and create a god they can see and touch, a god in the form of a golden calf.

In the ensuing fury that accompanies Moses' descent and discovery of this idolatry, it becomes clear that God's relationship with the Israelites will not survive if God can only be found on the top of a mountain in the desert. Moses insists that God must find a way to travel

with the people, and in response, God gives Moses blueprints to create the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant.

As you may remember from last week, the Ark of the Covenant was a moveable chest that held the 10 Commandments, which were the visible representation of God's promise to the Israelites. And the Tabernacle was the tent within which the Ark of the Covenant resided. With these two sacred items constructed, the people were confident that God was now dwelling within their midst and they are able to proceed, carrying God with them into battle and eventually across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land.

Last week we read of the Ark's journey to Jerusalem, and our scripture reading for this morning picks up in the very next chapter. King David is finally feeling at rest and at ease in Jerusalem. He has a large house and seems, for the moment at least, to be free of irritating distractions from his enemies. And so he proposes to the prophet Nathan that he build a house for God, because why should David live in such a nice house while the Ark of the Covenant resides in a tent?

The text gives us no indication of what David's motives are for this building project, but a few possibilities present themselves given what we know of David. It's possible that David is simply bored. He has been on the run for so long, fighting first for his life and then for the throne, that perhaps this newfound ease is unsettling and he is in need of something to do. Or, perhaps David is motivated purely by a devotion to and love of a God who has been with him from the beginning and who has given him so much. Or, perhaps, David's motives are more political and manipulative in nature. Perhaps David hopes that if he builds a Temple for the Lord, he will be securing the Lord's presence in Jerusalem—ensuring the connection between God and monarchy for years to come. We can't know what David's motives are, but given that he was human, we can safely assume that it was some combination: good motivations and political motivations, selfish motivations and selfless motivations all mixed together.

Whatever David's motivations, we can, I suspect, empathize with David's desire to have a permanent place where God could reliably be found. Isn't that something we would all like, really? Somewhere we could go where we would be assured of God's presence? Where we would know for certain that God was listening? A place where the experience of holiness, that feeling of deep and abiding peace and well-being would be guaranteed?

Indeed, even the prophet Nathan, gives his ready assent to David's plan. Why wouldn't he? Why wouldn't God want a Temple as grand as the house that David has built for himself? Something that would reflect God's status as king above all kings?

But God's answer is no.

At first, it seems like a complete rejection of David and his plan, almost a dressing down, "have I ever asked for a house? No, I have not, so do not presume to know what I want." But woven into God's response to David is far more than a simple rejection.

Walter Brueggemann refers to this passage as “the dramatic and theological center of the entire Samuel corpus. Indeed,” Brueggemann goes on, “[it] is one of the most crucial texts in the [whole of the] Old Testament.”¹ In part, this is because the passage highlights two crucial tensions that run throughout the Bible: the tension between God’s freedom (represented in the Ark) and God’s presence (represented in the Temple) and the tension between that which is purely political and that which is purely religious. But more important, according to Brueggemann, is the theological shift that occurs when God responds to David’s proposal. It’s so subtle that it’s easy to miss, but it is seismic in its implications.

Up until this point, God’s covenant with the people has been conditional: “I will be your God if you will be my people.” And what does it look like to be God’s people? It looks like following the Ten Commandments. Again and again as the Israelites journey toward the Promised Land, God promises them a land flowing with milk and honey so long as they obey God’s commands. Implicit in God’s covenant with the Israelites up to this point is the possibility that the Israelites might transgress so badly that God will sever all connection with them. But God’s response to David lays out a new relationship. While it is true that God is not going to allow David to build God a house, it is not a wholesale rejection of David, but a reminder of who is the real King. David won’t be building God a house, God has no need of a house, but (playing on the Hebrew word for house, which can also be translated as dynasty) God declares that God will build a house out of David. Indeed, throughout God’s response to David’s place, we are reminded over twenty times that it is God who is the actor in this relationship; it is God who is the subject of the verbs in this passage, while David is put back in his place as the object of God’s actions.

However, it is not God’s subtle and grammatical dressing down of David that makes this passage so remarkable; it is the fact that in the promises that God lays out for David, and by extension for Israel, there is not a single condition placed upon the people. God’s promise no longer depends on the people holding up their half of the covenant. As Brueggemann puts it, “in this astonishing promise, Yahweh has signed a blank check to the David enterprise and has radically shifted the theological foundations of Israel. This is not to say that there will not be sanctions and punishments, but they are not terminal [nothing David or Israel can do will ever cause God to abandon them]. This is a powerful, clear articulation of ‘justification by grace in which the ‘works’ of David or Israel are not decisive. God loves unconditionally.”² What God promises David is not that God will always be found in a Temple, but that God will always be found in relationship with the people, no matter what.

A Temple will eventually be sanctioned by God and built by David’s son, Solomon; and Israel, like us, will continue to struggle with the tension between God’s presence and God’s freedom. When the Temple is eventually destroyed, Israel will have to once again remember where it is God promises to be found. But the promise is recalled, and it is picked up centuries later by the author of the letter to the Ephesians when they write, “you are members of the

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 253.

² Ibid, 257.

household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” In other words, community is God’s dwelling place.

It would be easier, I suspect, if we could locate God in a particular place, if we knew there was somewhere we could go where we would be guaranteed to find holiness and divine presence, but there is no such singular place. Instead, God dwells wherever two or three are gathered together in Jesus’ name. We are the household of God, the dwelling place of God, the Temple in which God can be found. Whether we are together in person or on Zoom, whether we are multitudes or just a few, we are where God resides.

It’s not always easy, sometimes people can be so difficult (not us of course, we’re always delightful, but other people!), and community can be hard and messy, especially when we don’t agree or don’t see things the same way. But we are not the dwelling place of God in spite of those realities, we are the dwelling place of God because of those realities. God is found not just in moments of comfortable silence and common companionship, but also in differing ideologies, different views on vaccination, different comfort levels with wearing masks, different beliefs about how best to respond to global pandemics, poverty, racism, and a host of other issues.

It is tricky to attribute anything good to COVID when so many people have lost their lives and their livelihoods because of it, but I do believe that one of the gifts the church has received in this time is the necessity to remember and re-imagine what it means to be church, to be community, to worship, and to gather when we are not able to rely on a building to bring us together.

I know plenty of pastors and churches for whom this past year and a half have been a disaster, a death knell for their sense of call or their community, and I have no desire to sugarcoat these past 18 months for us at Covenant, they have been stressful and often exhausting, but I think they have also taught us, again and again, that God dwells not in a building but in and among us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.