

I was caught off guard this past Tuesday in our staff meeting when a prayer request written by a parishioner was prayed. At the end of their prayer request, and I'm paraphrasing, it read, "Lord, I know you can take care of yourself, but I still like to check in on you from time to time." It was so sweet and endearing. I delight in these times of being caught off guard like when a child or someone else innocently makes a statement or asks a simple yet also complex question, such as, "Where does God live?" I'm not the only one who is caught off guard, as many scholars have been debating this question for centuries upon centuries. In 2 Samuel the Lord sends his servant King David a message saying, "Are you the one to build a house for me to live in? I have never lived in a house, from the day I brought the Israelites out of Egypt until this very day. I have always moved from one place to another with a tent and a Tabernacle as my dwelling (7:5-7)? The Lord later tells David that it won't be him but rather his son, Solomon, who builds the Temple (1 Chronicles 22:7-10 and 22:8 and 1 Kings 8:18-19). This week's text in I Kings 8 features the Temple dedication- the Temple- a place for God to dwell- a place that Solomon had built and now prays over. But before we read today's text, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

Solomon has invited all of Israel, it seems, to the first Temple dedication, also known as Solomon's Temple, which was located north of Zion, the older part of Jerusalem where the ark of the covenant had most recently been. This temple dedication was a much bigger event than a royal wedding. It was, after all, the only house of God in the land. The Temple's construction was begun in the 4th year of Solomon's reign and was

absolutely exquisite- the exterior in stone, cedar-lined interior walls and cypress floors, two cherubs- placed in the inner sanctuary- made out of olivewood- their wings “spread out so that a wing of one was touching the one wall, and a wing of the other cherub was touching the other wall; their wings toward the center of the house were touching wing to wing, and were overlaid in gold” (1 Kings 6: 27-28). Gold overlaid most everything in the inner sanctuary where the cherubim’s wings now covered the ark of the covenant, which used to be on the move- covered in a tent tabernacle. You can imagine the tension created by moving the ark, where God was believed to dwell and could move around, to inside the temple, which was God’s new, fixed dwelling place. This innermost chamber of temple was known as the Holy of Holies. It took seven years to build this house in which God would live (1 Kings 6:38).

As I mentioned earlier, for centuries upon centuries, scholars have joined the Israelites in debating the mystery of God’s presence...God’s dwelling place. Here, in today’s story, we find a battle of sorts for God’s dwelling place among different Israelite understandings, inviting us to also ponder this great mystery as well. Let’s start with the Temple. Solomon states in his Temple dedication speech that he has built God “an exalted house, a place for God to dwell in forever” (v. 13). “Temples in the ancient world functioned in many ways fundamentally different from the manner in which synagogues and churches operate in Western civilization. The Temple was not simply a religious or cultic building. Its’ very name- its most common designation in the Bible is ‘House of Yahweh’- indicating that it

was conceived of as a residence...a dwelling place for God and not as a place of public worship and prayer. In fact, the general public had access only to the Temple courts and not to the inside of the structure itself” (Harper Collins Bible Dictionary, Achtemeier, p. 1097). For in the inner sanctuary was the Ark of the covenant, the most important object in the Temple. If the building as a whole was believed to be the earthly dwelling place of God, then the Ark represented both God’s presence as well as the binding covenantal relationship between God and Israel.

Another ancient sign of God’s presence mentioned here is in a cloud. We’re told that when the priests came out of the holy place, “a cloud filled the house of the Lord so that they priests could not stand. Clouds are a symbol of the Lord’s presence in Exodus and elsewhere in the Bible, and yet Solomon hopes that God will choose to settle in the Temple and stay there. The king “envisions God fixed in the Temple, no longer the dynamic, free God of the ark and the cloud, which would set a sure political future for Solomon and his dynasty” (The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible, p. 499). Another representation of belief of God’s dwelling place in this story is when the ‘glory’ of the Lord appears, thus indicating the glowing radiance of God’s presence” (Harper Collins Bible Commentary, James May, p. 285). Another understanding of God’s presence found here insists that the Lord is attentive to the temple but in fact dwells in heaven.” This understanding knows that there’s a temptation to try and domesticate God. God cannot be put into a box or a building to be “managed, ruled over or controlled” - not even by a powerful king nor bad theology. “The prophets Jeremiah and

Ezekiel both warn Israel later that the belief that God dwells in the Temple cannot be construed to mean that God has become a possession of Israel” (*A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, Brueggemann, p. 249). Therefore, God is present symbolically in the temple but lives in heaven. This understanding is not against the temple, as it still values the temple as a special place to approach God, but it holds more modest claims for the temple (Bruggemann). Regardless of which belief of where God dwells, the Israelites “shared with all people the need for a visible and material indication that God was nearby” (Harper Collins Bible Dictionary, Achtemeier, p. 1100). So, which is correct? Where DOES God dwell?

Let me be clear. God’s dwelling place is always with God’s people, whether in a tent, a temple or church building, wherever the heart of God is, God makes a home. These various approaches and understandings of God’s presence here permit us to turn to wonder. What places or practices do we understand as helping us to experience God’s presence? Notice that there’s one more example of understanding God’s dwelling place in this chapter: a place which God says, “My name shall be there” (v.29)- a place where prayers are heard. This manner of understanding communicates the freedom of God to go and dwell where God will. God is present through the divine name. God, who is with us, comes down on the side of freedom and God acts. “The worshipers gathered have needs. They know something is wrong they cannot correct. This is not a God at our disposal but one inclined to loving and gracious ways (1 Kings, Brueggemann, p. 29). Again, God cannot be contained in any building or by any ritual action. Even

Solomon in his prayers cannot command, but only ask God. God is the one doing the commanding.

A friend of mine tells the story of years ago chaperoning her daughter's 5th grade class trip to Washington, D.C. After being crammed in the bus for a while, their first stop was to visit the National Cathedral. My friend, who was in seminary at the time, was very aware of the chaos going on in the bus and got up to comment to the teacher in charge saying, "We cannot have them behave like this in the National Cathedral." The teacher responded by asking my friend if she'd ever been to the National Cathedral, which my friend said she had not. The teacher then said, "Wait and see what happens." My doubting and embarrassed friend said she couldn't believe what happened next. Those loud fifth graders, who seemed to be more interested in one another than in most of the sites they were visiting, immediately fell silent as they entered that sacred and holy place. You could've heard a pin drop. Something commanding came over them. Just from that space- they stopped their shouting and talking. There was something incredibly holy about that intentional, set apart space. A "my name shall be there" place. A "my heart shall be there" place. A place where God dwells.

But what about other places that don't look like sanctuaries but are places where God's name is there- places where God dwells? My parents really struggled when they came to visit me in Seattle while I was serving a one-year internship in a Presbyterian church that gathered for worship in a

movie theater. That's right- it was 25 years ago. We worshiped God in a movie theater and with a band that also sang some secular tunes. When pushed, my parents confessed that this wasn't their style of worship. I understood, as it was new then to me as well, and we all have our understandings of where we experience God, just as the Israelites did. At the same time, I wanted to push back and remind them that God is the One who makes the space sacred, not us. Just because it's not in a sanctuary, does that mean that God can't be worshiped? That God isn't present there? Who are we to say where that holy space is? I wonder if this is how we can block ourselves from fully experiencing God's presence?! Yes, some houses of worship are much more aesthetic...much more commanding than others. Nevertheless, God hears our prayers in the sanctuary and God hears our prayers when we aren't in the sanctuary. In the NT, the Gospel of Matthew, reminds us that Jesus says, "Where two or three are gathered there, I am there in the midst of them." I mean around here, where God's heart is, I call "holy chaos." Wherever walls are abolished and norms are sacrificed for the sake of reconciliation, there God dwells. What does God's dwelling place look like for you? Afterall, God's heart doesn't reside in any one particular place.

Maybe it looks like God dwelling where we recognize God by name, in scripture, in action and in prayer? Maybe it looks like the God of creation being present in Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit around a dinner table when the blessing is said and bread is broken? Or around the bedside when prayers are said at the end of the day? Or at the deathbed when

prayers are said to release someone into the more full presence of the living God- commending him or her to the Lord? These holy moments where God dwells don't always happen in a sanctuary though. How do we also greet the presence of the Lord at a birth when someone is welcomed into this life with God's claim- you're mine, the beloved? Or in our very bodies? God in Christ chooses to make a home out of the beloved community. These experiences don't take place in a sanctuary, either. There's something about holiness that's present when God is present. Whether on a mountain, within the Ark of the Covenant, the temple or sanctuary, the heart of a neighbor, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God with us, the power of the Holy Spirit in the beloved community, or in every single human being, God's presence can be experienced. There's also something about God that makes the unholy holy by God's presence alone. And in this sanctuary- in this holy place- this intentionally shaped place, God meets us here as well. Afterall, this is the place where we gather around the font and where we recognize the completion of baptism in death. It's the place of Christ's table, where all are invited to meet him here. If there's ever a place where God is present, it's when we share in the Lord's Supper together. God is present in all of these places- not to mention in our hearts as well as in the faces of those we meet along the way. And so the mystery continues, as does the debate. May we all continue to wonder as well as to experience the great mystery of God's dwelling place among us, especially paying attention to the places we least expect God to dwell. Amen.