

“Holy Presence”

Ephesians 6: 10-20, I Kings 22-30, 41-43

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*“Will God indeed dwell on earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee, how much less this house which I have built.”*

Look around this church. What do you see? When a church decides to put down roots in a certain location a lot of thought goes into the design and layout of that church. A church’s sanctuary, for example, may give a perceptive visitor clues about what is important to that faith community. It would be interesting to compare the sanctuary of St. Augustine’s Church up Hopewell Road and to what you see here.

This sanctuary may seem sparse in comparison. In true meeting house fashion, there are few permanent symbols in our sanctuary. The location of the pulpit and the organ tell their own story. The simple cross hanging prominently above the preachers head says something else. There is a difference in the tone of worship when the organ is played than when the piano is played. Something changes when the choir leaves the choir loft and sings from the front of the sanctuary. The banners tell their own story about what will happen in worship that day and the liturgical season. The windows are clear and unadorned. Every church tells a story if you know how to read the clues..

I wonder if churches have outlived their usefulness? That may seem like an absurd question however there are many young people in Generation X who might make this argument. They may contend that their church is in cyberspace and they worship online. There are other 20 something Christians who have started new churches in coffee houses and old warehouse building. They are free to dictate what the worship space should look like, what constitutes “worship” to them. Many of us might wonder where would the church be without the church? How would we worship God if we did not have a place to gather? Solomon wondered the same thing. The reading we hear this morning is part of a larger story of triumph and perseverance. However, there is great and lasting wisdom in Solomon’s prayer. He exhibits both wisdom and humility as he comes before God. Solomon understands, perhaps better than many of us, that God can never be

contained in any single place, even a place as magnificent as the Temple he was about to dedicate.

The tone of this prayer is remarkable because King Solomon was never known for his humility. After all, he was King David's son. Many believed Solomon's reign was the high point of Israel's prosperity and prominence as an empire. On this particularly magnificent day Solomon stands before the people of Israel to dedicate the temple at Jerusalem, this grand new house of God that has been built during his reign. The king declares that this will be a place of prayer, of national unity, a place of divine presence and comfort for the sorrowful. This is the kind of speech one would expect at such a moment of national self-congratulation and royal pride. But then King Solomon says something surprising. He wonders, "will God indeed dwell on earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee, how much less this house which I have built."

Solomon understood that any house of worship, even one as grand as this, can never contain God. He knowingly admits that heaven, even the highest heaven, cannot contain God. We call churches "a house of God." Do we truly believe this? Do we think of this as "our church" or is it God's church? Our language is a bit telling in this regard. Obviously, we do not believe that God literally lives here. When we say this we are pointing to our experience of this place. When we have come seeking a word from God, a healing touch, a comforting embrace, a word that will guide and empower us, so often we have found it here. What we find here, what we seek here, what we long for in our relationship with God, we find when we come. How many of us could proclaim as our ancestor Jacob did so long ago, "surely the presence of the Lord is in this place!"

Solomon understood that no structure, regardless of its grandeur, extravagance or beauty, could ever contain God. We get caught between the necessary human inclination to build walls, shrines, and places for the holy one to dwell, and knowing truly that these structures can never contain God. Years ago J.B. Phillips published a book entitled, "Your God is Too Small," in which he mildly mocked the way we make God into a policeman, or an errand boy, or daddy or mommy. A little God is no match for the great joys or the great sadness of life, says Phillips. We know that God is so much more, beyond that which we could ever envision, beyond that which we might ever try to domesticate.

There is something else truly remarkable about Solomon's prayer. Not only did he understand that no physical structure human beings could build could ever contain God, but he also understood that this God was not simply a God for the Hebrew people but for all people. (vs 41-43) Several important tensions are held in Solomon's great prayer: God is identified with a place and engaged in the life of a particular people, but God is not limited to one place, God is identified with a people, but not limited to that people alone. God is not a tribal deity. Solomon prays that the temple will be a house of prayer for all people, not only his people, but all people. No temple can contain God, nor can any people control the will of God.

Throughout history faithful people have dedicated precious resources to the building of sacred structures. Every religion has a place in which to worship; churches, temples, mosques. Some are magnificent in their simplicity and others are breathtaking in their extravagance. People of faith make pilgrimages around the world to experience some of these amazing places of worship. There is The Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, Westminster Abbey in London, the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. One of the most sacred places I have ever visited was the Temple of the Gods at Machu Pichu, in Peru. On that site of ancient Inca ruins, I most clearly felt the presence of God. People all over the world have spent millions of dollars and decades of time and labor constructing houses of worship. Some people lament spending such time and money on a building when that money could be used to minister in a more practical way to God's people. What good is a beautiful building when people are homeless and have nothing to eat? It reminds me of the argument the disciples make when the woman breaks her costly alabaster jar of ointment to anoint Jesus just prior to his death. What motivates people to invest so much in a building?

We believe, as did our ancestor Solomon, that when we come into a church, we enter into the presence of God. While this is not the only place where the Spirit of God may dwell, it is our expectation that when we come here we will have an encounter with the Holy. It is not simply the surroundings, the architecture, the bricks and mortar that insure the presence of God. It is what we do here that leads us to believe this is where the Holy One dwells. However, we also understand, as did our ancestor Solomon, that God is not contained within this or any other structure.

We might assume the beauty and grandeur of a building automatically ensures the presence of God. However, I have been in the most beautiful

chapels in Mexico and Spain, gilded with gold and adorned with beautiful artwork and not felt the presence of God. I remember visiting a very modest stone Methodist church in a poor neighborhood in Lima, Peru. This church had only a few pictures on its walls, wooden pews and a simple wooden cross on the altar. Yet, it did not take long to know you were in the presence of God. There is an expression I remember hearing in the church I served in Washington, DC. There, we would not simply “go to church,” we would “have church.” On any given Sunday, someone was likely to exclaim, “Girl, we had church today!”

You know when you have “had church.” However, if the church were not here, if there were no place for us to gather, we might never have the opportunity to “have church.” This is why we continue to build churches. It is why this church will spend many hours prayerfully discerning how to modify our physical structure so that all God’s people will feel welcome here. If you can’t get from the sanctuary to the bathroom, you don’t feel very welcomed. It is hard to experience the presence of God when you can’t make it safely or easily into the sanctuary. Together we will discern how to modify the building so that it better fulfills our mission to be a house of prayer for all people. It is easy to put in an elevator or change the hallways so people with limited mobility are able to get around. It is more challenging however, to deconstruct our prejudices and dismantle our long held beliefs so that we might become the kind of community God would have us to be.

The church is more than a physical structure. A church without a congregation is a memorial to the past. We come each Sunday seeking a word from God. We sit in meditation, trusting that the Spirit will find its way into our soul and rest a while with us. We sing our faith because we know the very act of singing speaks to a part of our being that the spoken word can not as effectively reach. We can not be the church unless we gather together, to pray, to sing, to learn, to argue and to love. The preacher and teacher, William Willimon says that we are animals. God may be infinite, immense and unbounded, but we are not. We need time, and place, and opportunity. We live, not by grand and noble ideas and ideals but by touch, and taste. How wonderful, he says, then that God condescends to deal with us in ways that bend to our need, in bread and wine, in the water of baptism, in a building called church. That God stoops to us.”

God does not need the church. God needs the people, but God does not need us to build bigger and more extravagant structures in order to be in communion with God's people. However, we need the church. We need to know that when the time comes to begin our faith journey, God is waiting for us at the baptismal font. When we need to be fed, to remember the sacrifice Jesus made and the gift he gave of himself, God is at the table offering us an extravagant welcome. When we find the one true love of our life, God is in the candle we light and the blessing we receive. Then, when life's journey ends, God enfolds us as we weep and celebrate the gift of friends and loved ones. This is where we come to meet God and it is from this place what we go back into the world to share what we have so graciously received. This building is not holy. It is what happens here in the name of our living God that makes it and us holy.

Though God is not contained by this place which we have built, the Holy One is always here. God in love, the God of Israel and the church, is never content to remain aloof or distant. This God, out of love, stoops, seeks, searches, surrounds and speaks. Willimon says, "therein is the promise that we test and prove every time we enter this place." Will God indeed dwell on earth? King Solomon declared "Behold heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee, how much less the house, which I have built. Yet, O God, have regard to our prayers...night and day, open thine eyes toward this house, the place of which thou has said, 'My name shall be there'." It has been so throughout the ages. May it always be so! Amen

Source:

William Willimon, "An Uncontainable, Yet Accessible God." Sermon August 27, 1997.