

Where Does God Dwell?

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost,
August 23, 2009,
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Texts: 1 Kings 8.(1,6,10-11) 22-30, 41-43,
Psalm 84,
Ephesians 6.10-20,
John 6.56-69

Last week Gordon reflected on the gospel of John through the lens of his experience with our youth group on their mission trip to New York City at the beginning of August. While they were there they worshipped with some members of the Greenpoint Reformed Church who are part of the recovery ministries there. Some of them shared their stories with the youth. The first step of any recovery program is to admit that you are powerless over the brokenness (or addiction) of your life and you cannot manage it on your own. What I've been thinking about is Gordon's observation of how challenging that kind of assertion is in a community like ours. On the one hand we live in a place where faith is strong. You'd think it would be obvious and easy for us to admit our total dependence on God. But on the other hand, we also live in a place where so many people can still labor under the illusion that the success of their life comes from the work of their own hands. To suggest otherwise can feel a bit like an insult.

Jesus presses this very point with his followers in the gospel of John. He challenges them to acknowledge that the bread of life comes from God. The bread of life is a metaphor in John's gospel to describe where human beings receive the source of their sustenance. And Jesus insists that their ability to live and move and have their being comes from God. In this teaching, Jesus locates the presence of God not in hard work and success, not in the temple, not in the rituals of worship, not in the religious leadership, but in the "words that I have spoken to you (which) are spirit and life."¹

This is an interesting passage to pair with Solomon's dedication of the temple. Having these texts side by side highlights a tension present

¹ John 6.63

throughout the Hebrew Scriptures between temple and torah²: sacred space or sacred teaching. Torah is a word that refers to the first five books of the Old Testament which contain the law of God. It is a short hand way of referring to all the teachings of God handed down through the tradition of Moses. This passage from 1 Kings describes the dedication of the temple which is the moment when Solomon creates a permanent structure to serve as sacred space set aside for the rituals of worship.

I know for Protestants ritual has gotten a bad rap. I hope part of what we do at Hope Church is to be a place that seeks to retrieve the power of ritual for the ways it can feed our souls. As we participate in them, the rhythms of worship get inside of us. It helps to sustain our connection to the transcendence of God's Spirit. What I mean by that is worship helps me stay clear that there is power available to me that goes beyond my own strength; wisdom beyond my insight; forgiveness beyond my stingy sense of grace.

You can perhaps see the transforming power of worship most clearly in the lives of people who are suffering. How many times have you read stories or heard testimonies of people who not only survived but actually flourished under incredible strain because of the resources of their faith that were shaped in the worship of God: songs they had memorized, scripture they knew by heart, words of God they received in worship that penetrated their souls and gave to them hope. I am thinking of faithful Jews and Christians who survived the Holocaust. I am thinking of the testimony of what sustained Nelson Mandela during those 27 years he sat in prison in South Africa. I am thinking of the battered wife searching for the strength to leave or the discouraged unemployed worker grasping for a sense of purpose even when work cannot be found. I am thinking of people in this room during seasons of your own suffering. When those seasons come, we touch back to the foundations of our faith that have been shaped by the rituals of worship shared in the sacred spaces of our modern day temples. "How lovely is your dwelling place, O God of Hosts!" We can understand why the Psalmist would begin with that cry.

² This phrase of "temple and torah" is borrowed from Walter Brueggemann, in *First and Second Kings*, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2000), pg 89.

Given this reality (the power of sacred space and sacred ritual) you can appreciate why Solomon would direct so much of the wealth of Israel toward the construction of the temple. Creation of sacred space and the setting apart of sacred time for worship pushes us to acknowledge that God is present. It is true that God is everywhere present and all of life is holy. And it is also true that we are much more likely to acknowledge the presence of God and the holiness of life when we have places and practices that are set apart to remind us of that truth.

I want to return to that tension I mentioned before between temple and torah. I hope I've made the case for why worship centered in a communal space is so life-giving for Israel and for us. But there is a danger that the maintenance of the sacred space and the practice of the religious ritual would become a substitute for the holy living those spaces and rituals are designed to inspire. The prophets take a harsh view of this danger.... Jeremiah issues a fierce prophecy in Jeremiah chapter 22, dripping with sarcasm, when he asks "are you a king because you compete in cedar?" (I need to pause for a moment to make the connection here. Solomon used cedar all over in the construction of temple. If you read 1 Kings 6 and 7 you will see that the use of cedar is prominent. Cedar is a symbol of wealth.³ Ok – listen again to this prophecy.)

*"Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? **Then** it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and the needy, **then** it was well. Is this not to know me? says the Lord?"⁴*

If the temple is not in the service of the teachings of the torah (the teachings of God), then it is a mockery. If our worship of God does not transform us so that we live according to the ways of God, then it is in vain.

What we've seen through this whole cycle of readings this summer with both David and Solomon is the pernicious way that worldly power pulls us away from the ways and values of God. Even David and Solomon were overcome at times by the tantalizing promise of power: they used their wealth, military might, their position in ways that were utterly destructive to the values of the torah. The writer of Ephesians views this tendency to get pulled away from the ways of God as part of a spiritual battle.

³ Brueggemann makes this observation about cedar as a social symbol, pg. 79

⁴ Jeremiah 22.15-1, emphasis added.

When I was in college I was on the youth ministry staff of a very large evangelical church. A number of people in that congregation were deeply involved in what is called spiritual warfare. This was when the series of books by Frank Perretti called *This Present Darkness* were all the rage (which takes its name from this passage from Ephesians). I can remember feeling very uncomfortable with this kind of theology and this way of viewing the world. I bristled at their assumption that what happens on the human plane is some mirror image of a spiritual realm where angels and demons battle. It troubled me for many reasons, one of which is it shifted responsibility for sin and participation in evil to forces outside of one's self. I saw it as a slightly more sophisticated version of the *devil made me do it* kind of philosophy.

It's only in more recent years that I've recovered this metaphor of doing battle with the powers and principalities. I don't think of it as having to do with some spiritual realm where demons and angels battle but rather a description of what it is like to stand up against powerful systems that seek to maintain their power at all costs. I see it as the kind of position the prophets took against the kings when they neglected the needs of the poor as they bolstered their own political position. (Now I know that never happens today.....it has been the way of the world whether a monarchy or democracy.) I have heard stories about some of you who have waged those kinds of battles through the years - positioning yourselves to stand firm...putting on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. It was interesting to learn that this metaphor which uses military images was written for the early Christian community that was essentially pacifist in nature.⁵ The early Christian martyrs were precisely martyrs because they refused to take up arms against their enemies...their only weapon was the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.

There's a very compelling reflection on this passage in the Christian Century magazine this month in which the author describes a picture he found in the book *Parting the Waters*, which is a history of the civil rights movement. I have a copy of the book on a table in the gathering area if you'd like to see it. It's a picture of a lunch counter sit-in in 1969 where two white people and one African American sit together at a segregated

⁵ Ward, Haruko Nawata *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), pg. 376.

restaurant. The place is packed with protestors; it's ugly. The author of the article believes this to be "a scene of the cosmic powers of that dark time." I don't mean that it is a picture of a group of demon-possessed people but a group swept up in the fear of their day trying to maintain power at all costs. The picture shows something else as well. In the seemingly passive state of these non-violent protestors you can see what it looks like to "be armed with nothing but the gospel of peace."

It speaks to this question of where does God dwell:

God dwells in those who make themselves ready to proclaim the gospel of peace;

God dwells in those who feed on the bread of life;

God dwells in the sacred spaces wherever they may be found where Christ's words are not just admired but where they are put into practice.

Jesus said: The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

Thanks be to God.