

Sermon – God’s Dwelling Place

Sunday, August 28, 2018

Scripture Readings – I Kings 8:22-30, 41-42, John 6:56-69

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Our first scripture reading is I Kings 8:22-30 and 41-42. I Kings 8 begins with Solomon gathering the people at the newly constructed temple, and the priests bringing the Ark of the Covenant into the inner sanctuary. Today’s reading is Solomon’s prayer at the dedication and a plea for tolerance, inclusion, and respect for the foreigner within this temple. The completion of the temple was the pinnacle of his reign during the 10th century BCE. This is the first of three consecutive temples built on the same site which today houses the Muslim Shrine, the Dome of the Rock. Let us open our hearts and minds to the Word of God.

22 Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. 23 He said, "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, 24 the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand. 25 Therefore, O Lord, God of Israel, keep for your servant my father David that which you promised him, saying, "There shall never fail you a successor before me to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your children look to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me." 26 Therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you promised to your servant my father David. 27 "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! 28 Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; 29 that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, "My name shall be there," that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. 30 Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive....

41 "Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name 42—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, 43 then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is John 6:56-69. The bread of life discourse found in John’s gospel concludes with a powerful affirmation of faith by Simon Peter to Christ. *We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.* The belief at the heart of our faith, that God would choose to dwell among us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, is not uncontroversial. There is division among the followers of Christ in today’s reading. Theologian James Newsome contends the difficulty may have more to do with Christ’s invitation to participate in his death than misreading the bread metaphor as an invitation to literally eat Christ’s flesh. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” 59 Jesus said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” 61 But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65 And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67 So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” 68 Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “God’s Dwelling Place”

The Text: But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house...” 1 Kings 8:27

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, thank you for choosing to dwell among and within us, whether in the beauty of the sanctuary of your creation, in the loveliness of temples, churches and cathedrals, or in the wonder and mystery of the One who came to us as the Bread of Life. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

The dedication of Solomon’s temple was a culminating event in the life of the Israelite people and one more validation in their rich faith history that God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, dwelt among them.

The ark of the covenant, which was placed in the holiest part of Solomon’s temple was the same ark Rev. McGill referenced two weeks ago in his sermon “God’s Presence and the Work of Human Hands.” The ark was built by skilled artisans during the time Moses led the Hebrew people in Sinai before entering the Promised Land and was housed in the tabernacle or sacred tent which served as Israel’s portable sanctuary prior to this symbolic placement in the holiest inner sanctuary of the temple. The tablets of the law were contained in the Ark of the Covenant. This was the center of their worship and provided a reassuring sense of God’s presence and leading.

Knowing how far and for how long the Ark of the Covenant traveled with the Israelite people, reminding and reassuring them of Yahweh’s presence, makes its final placement into the holiest part of Solomon’s temple especially climactic and meaningful. This was the homecoming for which they had longed and waited for centuries.

When the Ark is placed in its new home, the importance of the moment is confirmed by a sign from God. A cloud which is equated with the “glory of God” permeates the temple. This darkness wraps the temple in the mystery of God’s presence. Yahweh’s own presence comes to reside in the temple dedicated to the worship of Israel’s God. The temple is not only beautiful, it is the one place, above all others, where God is to be found.

And yet, as Solomon affirms, who can contain the transcendent majesty that is Yahweh? Neither the earth nor the heaven, including the highest heaven is great enough. Surely this building of cedar and costly stones, splendid though it is, cannot contain Yahweh. No, Yahweh is uncontainable. God's understanding is unsearchable.

As much as Solomon's prayer of dedication affirms God's presence within worship in a concrete and special way, with the people of God who are gathered together, wise Solomon also criticizes a too exclusive and limited understanding of God. The God who is present in worship cannot be limited to it. Thus, God is potentially present to all people in all places, and those in worship who know this have a responsibility to communicate God's generosity and mercy rather than hoard it for themselves.

As the story of our Judea-Christian faith unfolds, we are confronted with yet another dimension of God's dwelling place in the wonder and mystery of the person of Jesus Christ. In Christ, God chose to join us in our humanity and to conquer death by dying on the cross.

In today's gospel reading, the invitation to partake of Christ, the Bread of Heaven, is an opportunity to find strength in communion, to proclaim the saving death of our Risen Lord. The invitation to partake of Christ, the Bread of Heaven, is to be willing to walk the way of sorrow with him and with those we love when we are called to do so. The invitation to partake of Christ, the Bread of Heaven, is a call to embrace the sorrow as well as the joy that is a part of life, and to find strength for this journey within the worshipping community.

I have had the privilege to serve as your pastor for five years. During this time, we have shared a journey together as a faith community and we have shared our individual journeys with one another. I have been amazed by the ways you reach out to one another sustaining those among us who find themselves on difficult and challenging paths. I have been strengthened by the courage and resilience with which so many of you have persevered the injustices and losses you have encountered at different crossroads in your lives, often becoming advocates for others who need your voice and experience. And I have been inspired by the way you have faced your own unexpected detours and disappointments with open minds and hearts, rebuilding and finding another way to give your life meaning, or simply enduring the wear and tear from ordinary roads.

Peter, our son Paul, and I returned from our trip to Berlin, Wittenberg, Prague and Dresden last Sunday, exhausted and grateful for the journey. We had the privilege of visiting beautiful, historic sanctuaries and felt in awe and embraced by God's Spirit in each of God's dwelling places... from the Castle Church in quaint Wittenberg where Martin Luther posted the 95 theses in 1517 initiating the Reformation to the magnificent Dresden Catholic Cathedral built in 1739, bombed and torn in two during the Second World War, then restored and resurrected in the early 21st century following reunification. It was here where we heard a culminating concert from the carefully restored organ, the last work of the renowned organ builder Gottfried Silbermann. The music filled the sanctuary, not unlike the ancient cloud which permeated Solomon's temple, symbolizing the presence of the glory and mystery of God, and our spirits were nurtured and strengthened.

How thankful we are to be home, worshipping with our faith community in this beautiful sanctuary. How grateful we are to belong to a God, whom even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain, and yet, who chooses to dwell among us and within us.

I close with the words of Psalm 84, which are engraved within our Memorial Garden.

*How lovely is God's dwelling place!
Our spirits long for the courts of the Lord.
Our hearts sing for joy to the Living God.
Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself where she may lay her young.
Happy are those who find their home in God's sanctuary.
They go from strength to strength.
So be it. Amen.*