

“Of Dwelling Places”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 26, 2018

14th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 84

Rev. John Wahl

I Kings 8:22-30

Last week, we read a passage from several chapters earlier in the Old Testament book of I Kings. A young Solomon had just ascended to the throne previously held by his father, King David. As there was yet no Temple in Jerusalem, he went to Gibeon to offer sacrifices to God. While there, the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream, offering to give him anything he desired. Solomon responded to God by praying for wisdom: the ability to recognize good and evil so that he could rule the people with justice. This request pleased God who granted him not only that wish, but material blessings as well.

This morning, we encounter Solomon again; in the eleven years that have passed, the Temple has been meticulously constructed, using the finest of building materials. When all is ready, Solomon brings up the Ark of the Covenant, which has been residing in the Tabernacle, and places it in the completed Temple, the innermost sanctuary – the Holy of Holies. As soon as the priests put the Ark in its place, a cloud fills the Temple and the glory of the Lord inhabits it.

The Temple that Solomon built and dedicates in today’s text will live in the Israelite imagination even long after it is destroyed by the Babylonians, and long after its replacement, the Second Temple, is destroyed by the Romans. Their longing for the Temple, and for the city of Jerusalem in which it stood, is the reason that the Western Wall – the remaining wall of the Temple Mount closest to the original site of the Temple – remains Judaism’s holiest site.¹

In last week’s reading, God initiates the conversation with Solomon in a dream. In this week’s passage, Solomon initiates the prayer. In the presence of the assembly, he orients himself toward the inner sanctuary and stretches his hands out wide. This prayer of dedication, much like what we do each week following the collection of our offerings, is meant to show reverence and thanksgiving for God’s faithfulness; and for the blessed opportunity to encounter God in this place and beyond.

¹ Kathryn Schifferdecker from *WorkingPreacher.com*

The dedication of the Temple marks for Israel the end of a long and arduous struggle for freedom and security. Under Solomon's rule, at last the Jewish people had complete ownership of the Promised Land and peace has been established with their neighbors. No longer are they a band of wandering nomads longing for a place to call their own; they are an established kingdom with a stable government headed by a beloved king.

God's plan for Israel had come to fruition. So, it was time for God to stop living in a moveable tent and establish a permanent sanctuary. This is a high point in the history of Israel, and in the history of God's redemptive actions. As such, it has great ramifications for God's people, including God's people in the church today.²

But, not in the way that you might think. You see, as much as we care about and care for our church buildings and their sanctuaries, and the services of worship that take place there, we are not under the illusion that God resides in them. Even Solomon knew that while the Temple is a place where God can be encountered, it is not God's permanent residence. "Will God indeed dwell on earth?" Solomon asks, "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" (v. 27)

How can an omnipresent God become localized? How can a universal God be limited to one place? No house that we build, or come to for worship, will contain God; who is just as likely to be found in a tent, on a mountaintop, or in a hospital room. God is present with God's people throughout Scripture: in foreign lands, in the wilderness, and (most fully) in Christ, Emmanuel – God-with-us.

God had promised to Abraham that "all people on earth will be blessed through you." (Gen. 12:3) Though Israel may have at times forgotten their mission to be "a light to the nations," God never did; always intending to bless the world through his people Israel, through God's dwelling with them and through the miracle of God dwelling on earth through the incarnation of Jesus.

Even after God's people failed and their Temple was destroyed, God recommitted to his covenant with them; not focusing on a place or a people, but on one person in whom God would be present to bless and to save the world. Jesus is the new Holy of Holies, where anyone and everyone, Jew or Gentile, can find the

² Stan Mast from *Center for Peaching Excellence*

presence and blessing of God. In Jesus, the Temple became human; as John's Gospel says, "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1)

Though God is universal, not to be contained by any human building, God in Christ is also local and particular. For us, as this portion of God's people who gather to worship in this particular dwelling place, place matters. While God may dwell anywhere, the places where we experience that presence, that connection to the holy, deserve to be honored and cared for. The sanctuary – whether in Jerusalem or Bainbridge – is a reflection of God's presence.

Last week, we had a time of conversation to share an experience of worship that we felt was meaningful, and therefore memorable. Today, we are back in this sanctuary – after a week in our outdoor chapel and a week in the Fellowship Hall – and I would like to again take a few minutes to share with a conversation partner or two a reflection on a place where you felt the presence of God; maybe it is a place made by human hands or maybe a corner of God's creation. What was the architecture of that place, how did it look and sound and smell and feel? And why, do you think, did the place matter in helping you to experience God? After a couple minutes, I will call us back together again...

In Christ, we have been given a new kind of Temple. The old Temple in Jerusalem was a place of God's presence, but it was also a place of atonement. The Old Testament established a system of animal sacrifice to wash away sins. The Temple was the place where people would go to pay for their sins. It was quite an enterprise; in Jesus' day, at Passover alone, the Temple was visited by tens of thousands of people who would offer thousands of lambs.

When Jesus and his disciples visited the Temple, they were impressed by the size of the crowds and the grandeur of its huge stones. But Jesus spoke to them of a different kind of Temple, his body. Likewise, the Apostle Paul imagined the assembly of believers as being like a body with many different parts, with different gifts and functions. Our churchly body, like our human bodies – though often broken and in need of healing – is redeemed.³

The body of Christ – the part of the body called Valley Presbyterian Church and other parts throughout the world – is not a place of atonement. Jesus finished

³ Paul Bellan-Boyer, "Temple Talk"

that work; we have been forgiven. Now, the Temple of Christ is a place of reconciliation; called to look for where God is at work in our neighborhoods, where the body of human community is healed and redeemed, and where his disciples live together in love.

Place matters. The places where God dwells become holy places. It is a mystery that so often in the places in our lives, our bodies, and our physical spaces that are hurt or broken, God's goodness can shine through. God's kingdom is not built with the biggest stones, but with the living stones of God's people, who are connected by something more mysterious and fragile, yet stronger than any mortar. We honor this Temple and build this kingdom by showing mercy, by helping one another, by living in love and by seeking God's peace. And we gain strength for the journey by seeking God's presence; not because these human-built dwelling places can contain God, but because it is here that we gather to prepare to be sent, joining with God who is already out ahead of us. AMEN.