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Will God, Indeed, Dwell on Earth?

Text: I Kings 8: 1, 22-30, 41-43.

Few things in the Old Testament are religiously more important than the Temple in Jerusalem. It is easy to understand why that is so, for God was thought to dwell personally there in the Holy of Holies. The prophet Isaiah, in fact, when he was high priest and had entered that inner sanctum had a vision of God sitting on a throne surrounded by cherubim and seraphim that seemed to prove the point. Thus, when only a few years later, Jerusalem was delivered from an enemy's siege, the people of Jerusalem, remembering that God had been seen in the Temple, claimed that they were delivered because God would not let the Temple be destroyed since it was his home. Much later, when, much to their surprise, the Temple was destroyed and the people sent into exile in a foreign country, they wondered how they could carry on religiously without it. It just didn't seem possible to worship their God without the Temple. Then, when they returned to Jerusalem from seventy years of exile, goaded on by the prophets, the first thing they did upon entering Jerusalem was to rebuild the foundations of the Temple. For much of the Old Testament, the Temple and loyalty to it also constituted the differences between the religiously good Judaeans, and their religiously impure cousins in the north.

For these reasons, Solomon's building of the Temple, and his dedication of it is pretty much the Old Testament equivalent of the Christian day of Pentecost. For just as the Church is where Christ dwells, and Pentecost is sometimes called the birthday of the Church, so, too, the Temple is where God in the Old Testament was thought to dwell, and Solomon's dedication of it was its day of birth.

Yet, as Solomon dedicates the Temple, very near the beginning of his prayer of dedication, he asks this question: “Will God, indeed, dwell on earth?” Although some might think that a rhetorical question, with “yes” being the understood answer, Solomon himself didn’t ask it that way. Indeed, he asks the question quite seriously, and ingenuously. For even he, the Temple builder, seems to think that it is a fact that God does not dwell on earth. Given that, his whole enterprise thus seems to be highly paradoxical, to say the least.

In asking the question this way, Solomon has a foot in an important tradition that stretches from well before his time to, literally, our time here in this place, this morning, in this Presbyterian church. This is a tradition that assumes, as a matter of course, that God *cannot* be contained. Solomon himself says as much immediately after asking the question about whether God dwells on earth or not. “Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” he says.

He stands on good authority. His father David had earlier tried to build a Temple, but God turned down the project, noting that from the time he had brought the people out of Egypt he had not dwelt in a house; rather, God moved, by his own volition, with the people. Later, the prophets countered the glib and smug assumption of the people that God dwelt in the Temple and that his presence guaranteed the safety of Jerusalem. Jeremiah flat out told them that was a stupid assumption. If they wanted to keep Jerusalem in one piece, they had better stop counting on the presence of the Temple and get serious about keeping the covenant. After they had failed to listen to Jeremiah, and had been deported to Babylon, the prophet Ezekiel reported a vision in which he saw God’s presence rising up out of the Temple and leaving it desolate and alone. Jesus, for his part, later prophesied that the Temple would be destroyed. A few years after that, the letter to the Hebrews argued that for Christians the Temple was no longer necessary or important, because

Christ, the high priest, had entered into the real Holy of Holies, into a house not made by hands. The assumption here, of course, is that a house made by hands is a second rate thing, and that God does not really dwell in such a place. So to all of these figures, the answer to Solomon's question would certainly seem to be, "No, God will not dwell on earth," or at least, that God cannot be contained by anything.

This is a tradition that is strong for Christians of the Reformed persuasion, including Presbyterians. One of the chief motivating factors in John Calvin's theology was a strong and unmitigated horror of idolatry, which is to say, a horror of confusing what is transcendent and creative on the one hand with what is created and limited on the other. Calvin echoed Solomon's words when he once noted that "it cannot be supposed that it is possible for [God] to be shut up in a certain place," although he thought that God allowed us to talk as if he were in specific places. That allowance, though, was simply because of the weakness of our minds.

This sense that God cannot be contained by anything is a factor in the way churches of the Reformed tradition have tended to build churches. Georgetown Presbyterian Church is an excellent example. Its stark simplicity is deliberately devoid of many decorative features, and this sanctuary certainly does not represent the presence of the deity by pictures, or statues, or holy water, or anything else, including stained glass. Even our cross standing on the communion table is, in good Reformed fashion, empty of a body, for, we reason, Christ is no longer on the cross, but now enthroned in glory in heaven. As one Catholic commentator has observed, though, it is not quite the case that our sanctuaries are actually devoid of symbolism. By taking away all hints that God is present here instead of heaven, we are symbolizing in a very powerful way the absence of God, and signaling that God surely does not dwell in a house made by hands.

Now, this is an important theological tradition, and I for one am glad to be part of it.

Recognizing that God is not, and cannot be contained by heaven or earth keeps us from idolatry. It keeps us from confusing what is created, and of the world, from the One who creates, and who exists eternally even if there were no world. It also keeps us from superstition, as well as from the cheap sentimentality that is far too often an ersatz for Christian faith, a confusion of warm feeling with the presence of the divine Spirit, for example. Taken seriously, it makes us somewhat tough minded about our faith, and offers a constant reminder about the really deep value of faith – that it is a call to something beyond the normal, that it is a witness to the unseen.

But faith cannot live simply on the bread of this critical insight alone. For, believing that God is not contained in a house made by hands surely has to cause us to ask what in heaven's name we are doing here, this Sunday or any Sunday, in this house made by hands. And there are numerous individuals, and even congregations, and I suspect even a few whole denominations, whose dedication to the proposition that God is not really here has caused them quit thinking about God's presence at all. "God" becomes a symbol of something in human striving, and little more. Then there is no call to the extraordinary, there is no ultimate sacrifice and no ultimate comfort. There is no love of God, for we do not know enough about God to offer any love. There is no faith that is a witness to the unseen. We have principles but no presence.

So, we, like Solomon, need to ask in all seriousness, "Will God, indeed, dwell on earth?" We need to find out. We need to know what we are doing here.

Now, let me say straight out, that the answer to the question of "will God, indeed, dwell on earth," is "yes." Solomon, at the same time that he knew that God is not contained by anything, himself knew that this is the answer to the question. For while God cannot be contained by anything, God can choose to dwell where God wants. And God has always chosen to dwell with his people. That is why God chose them, that is, to dwell with them. So God does not dwell

with them by law, or by nature, nor is God confined by any space, but he does dwell with them by goodwill and love and by his free choice to dwell with his people. And God dwells with them when, in prayer, they ask God to be with them.

That is why immediately after asking his penetrating question, Solomon prays: “Regard your servant’s prayer...that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house...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.”

So, no, God is not contained by anything in heaven or earth. God does not have to dwell here or any place. But that doesn’t mean that God won’t dwell in this house. For the God who loves his people hears their prayers, and God will dwell in this place as long as his people ask him to dwell here. God wills to dwell here.

Knowing that can give an important perspective on how to look at a church when one enters it. When entering a church, we are usually struck by its beauty or lack thereof. Now churches are beautiful in many different ways. The simplicity of this church may give a sense that God is not contained anywhere, and that God cannot be represented. But in that way it helps represent God’s steadfastness, God’s simplicity and unity, as well as the purity of God’s light. Gothic churches, on the other hand, give a sense of the awesomeness of God, and in their windows they show the many hues of the divine light that proceeds from God and that is shed upon us. They show the saints whose lives have been remade by God. Quaker meeting houses for their part remind us that the divine light is an inner light, and that we need to be simple and open to hear what God might say. Each type of church in its beauty gives a different sense of order, and in creating God ordered all things to the good. Together they all point to the good of the Creator. But it is sometimes helpful to look at something beyond these representations in a

church, for representations always point. It is right, for example, to look at these bricks and these beams and not see the paint or the colors or even the architecture but to look and see that these materials are permeated and soaked through by nearly two hundred years of prayers. Touch, for example, the wood of your pews and think about all of those who have prayed in them. They include those who, filled with joy and hope, have prayed at the beginning of life at baptisms, and they have seated the desperate prayers for comfort of those who have grieved at funerals. The prayers of those who have wanted to experience God's own presence in Holy Communion have soaked into this wood and these bricks, as have the prayers for forgiveness of those whose guilt has overwhelmed them, and the prayers of thanksgiving for forgiveness. In all those prayers God really has dwelt here among his people. As the prayers have soaked into the building, God has, too. And God will continue to dwell here as long as we pray. But God will not dwell here any longer if we don't pray, and if we dare to presume that we have captured God and contained him.

But there is something else here as well. When the prophet Jeremiah criticized the people for presuming that God was contained in the Temple, he told them that obeying the covenant was the real way to insure that God would dwell with them. That is right, just as I have claimed that God will not dwell here if we are to presume that we have captured God and don't pray openly and sincerely. But understand that this alternative is not a simple either/or that rests with us and our strength alone. For there is a mystery of grace behind God's indwelling of the church, namely that, even before we pray, God has indicated that he wants to be asked, and God has prepared the means for us to ask. He wants to dwell with his people, and God has therefore by his covenant with his people put everything here such that if we would but grab hold of it, we can worship here and be touched by God. For even before we asked or thought it possible, God chose to dwell among his people by letting himself be contained in human flesh, even though heaven and earth

cannot contain God. As we are told, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God chose to dwell among us so that we might be able to ask that God be with us. The Word that dwelt among us did so to call this people to receive God's own life, to call them to call upon God. That gift of the Word was given so that the Word might dwell in the hearts of those who come to his church. That is why there is a church at all, for Christ the Word established and built the church so that he might dwell in our hearts. And that is also why Christ the Word has given us the gifts of his written word, and the sacraments of baptism and of the holy Eucharist.

So, no, God is not contained by anything in heaven and earth. We cannot capture God, we cannot presume upon God except as we are fools. But God does choose to dwell among us, and God in Jesus Christ has come to dwell among us that we might have life in him, and that we might enter into that house not made by hands. Let us then open our hearts in prayer, and let us be filled with God's Spirit that we might be truly his.