

State College Presbyterian Church
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1 Kings 5:1-6, 18; 6:11-14
1 Kings 8:1, 6, 9-10, 12-13, 27

God is Where?

“But will God indeed dwell on earth?
Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee;
how much less the house which I have built.”
1 Kings 8:27

I was once, many years ago, pastor of a church where the church picnic was the high point of the year. It was an important tradition in that congregation going back through several generations. I well remember, in my seventh year as their pastor, as the time for the church picnic approached, being reminded by a number of folks that it had rained all day for the previous six church picnics.

Though there were pleasant memories of sunny picnics for decades previously, it had rained on the picnic in every year of my pastorate thus far. My parishioners, memories of six years of soggy hamburgers fresh in their minds, showed me no mercy: “what are you doing wrong?” they asked, “don't you have any influence with the boss?”

Even my snappy rejoinder, “I'm in sales, not management!” didn't seem to help. Now, they were kidding, I hope. Yet there are times when, in my profession, we meet up with the expectation, the yearning for the accessibility, for the predictability of God.

“Say a prayer, pastor.” is at times a request made with the implication that as a professional in religion, I ought to have some useful contacts, some influence, some special accessibility to God which is denied the average person.

The irony is that a pastor, the person some hope will be able to make God more accessible, sure to listen, hear, help, is also the very person faced with the challenge of explaining the times when God seems unaccountably absent.

I once received a letter from a person whose father was going through rough times. She wrote: “I asked why this has to happen to him. He is a fine, caring

man and a wonderful father. I cannot understand why God allows him to suffer so."

Then the question "why if we've been a good church, does it rain on our church picnic?" turns from a facetious to a very serious question indeed.

Eli Weisel, a holocaust survivor, once wrote: "All prayers finally become one prayer to God: where are you?. "Where are you?" is a serious question for anyone caught on the rocky shoals of life.

Solomon thought he had the answer! And, I will freely admit, the answer which came to Solomon has a captivating appeal about it.

Even at this distance and time, Solomon's answer was simple: God will be accessible! God will have a house, and in that house God will dwell. To that house may come anyone who wants to seek God. There in that house (called the Temple) they will find God.

"The Lord has set the sun and the heavens but has said that he will dwell in deep darkness, I have built thee an exalted house a place for thee to dwell in forever."

God's presence always accessible and predictable, in the Temple, in the Holy of Holies!

"Seek and you shall find!" the Bible says – and now we know where.

Well, here we are, sophisticated Americans of the 21st century, and we know better! God does not live in any building! Even Solomon eventually discovered that. "Heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain the, how much less this house!"

But yet, we are as hooked on the accessibility of God as Solomon was. We satisfy our yearning for accessibility by locating God either in particular persons or in systems of belief.

We'll look at those in reverse order.

How often has my way become the way? We're told if we only find the right way to believe, the key to happiness, the secret of the universe will be ours.

And there are still elements of this thinking within us, or else why bad things happen to good people wouldn't trouble us so.

Find the right way to believe, the right way to act and it will all be okay.

In our seeking for the accessibility of God, we also look for persons with answers: healers, teachers, spiritual guides, or pastors, in whom God seems to be more present than in ordinary people. We think if we find the right person their closeness to God will bring us to God.

We say we believe in the priesthood of all believers, that God is as close to you as to any faith healer or spiritual leader. That God is equally accessible to all. We say that we need no priest to plead our cause in the Holy of Holies. God is as close to us out on College Avenue as to the priest in the holy place.

We say we know that people have different God-given functions, but that no one on this earth has more accessibility to God than we do. Not Solomon nor all his priests.

"Where are you?" is a frightening, terrifying question to find on your lips when there is no human being any closer to finding an answer than you!

In fact, God's lack of accessibility would be unbearable, if it were not for God's faithfulness!

Even in the midst of today's Temple-building texts, God promises faithfulness.

"And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people."

That may sound a lot like accessibility, but it's not.

It's confusing that faithfulness and accessibility often seem like the same thing, yet they are worlds apart.

Accessibility is God in the house, or God in a special person, about do what you want if you pray the right way. Faithfulness is God who demands and responds as God will!

In the midst of the story of Temple-building, these words have snuck their way in: "I will dwell among you, not forsake you," not because of what you've built or who you are, but "if you walk in my statutes and obey my ordinances and keep all my commandments and walk in them."

Covenant is what counts, not temples or leaders. God's faithfulness is "I will not forsake you."

Even though your temple falls or your leaders disappoint you and God seems far away.

For God's accessibility has always been tempered by God's freedom. God's faithfulness is rooted in that same freedom

We have trouble believing God can be faithful and free. We look all over to find God, not realizing that we don't have to "find" God at all, because God has already found us.

The irony is that it is through Jesus Christ -- of whom the Bible says "he had no place to lay his head" -- that we have been found.

The tension with which we must always live is the tension between the absolute freedom and the absolute faithfulness of God. This is nowhere more visible than on the cross, as Jesus hangs suspended between "My God, why have you forsaken me?" and "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit."

Let's face it, it is hard to live without a temple. Temples can be comfortable and comforting. They have their uses. The secret about temples, whether your temple is a building, or a set of dearly cherished beliefs, or a leader who is so inspiring, is that they are always of secondary importance -- nice, but never all that important.

They only become negatively important if they stand between you and God, for nothing must ever be allowed to do that. If that happens, then the Temple must fall, to allow you to experience fully the freedom and faithfulness of God.

Amen.