

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: 1 Kings 8(1,6,10-11), 22-30, 41-43

The Ark Brought to the Temple

¹ Then King Solomon summoned into his presence at Jerusalem the elders of Israel, all the heads of the tribes and the chiefs of the Israelite families, to bring up the ark of the Lord's covenant from Zion, the City of David.

⁶ The priests then brought the ark of the Lord's covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and put it beneath the wings of the cherubim.

¹⁰ When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord.

¹¹ And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his temple.

Solomon's Prayer of Dedication

²² Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in front of the whole assembly of Israel, spread out his hands toward heaven ²³ and said: "Lord, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. ²⁴ You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it—as it is today.

²⁵ "Now Lord, the God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father the promises you made to him when you said, 'You shall never fail to have a successor to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your descendants are careful in all they do to walk before me faithfully as you have done.' ²⁶ And now, God of Israel, let your word that you promised your servant David my father come true.

²⁷ "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! ²⁸ Yet give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy, Lord my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day. ²⁹ May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My Name shall be there,' so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. ³⁰ Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.

⁴¹ "As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name—⁴² for they will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when they come and pray toward this temple, ⁴³ then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name.

Have you ever had a special place where you could go to and feel very close to God? I remember the first place where I could go and feel like God was sitting right next to me. I was about 12 years old, and I remember that there were many times when I made a stop on my way home from school at the church my mom, brother and I attended. It was a difficult time in my life.

So, I really wanted to feel close to God. I found that space in my church sanctuary. Many, many times, when no one was there, I quietly entered the church because I didn't want the pastor or the church secretary to know I was there. I crept up the stairs to the balcony and sat down. I spent a lot of time thinking and praying while I was there. I knew God was listening, I could feel God's presence. It was a safe treasured sacred space for me. Since then, other places have been just as precious to me. Maybe you can recall some of your sacred places.

I believe people long for sacred places – places where they can sense the supernatural. That is what Solomon's temple was intended to be. Ironically, that is what a Christian church is supposed to be. People need for churches to be sacred places where they can come and feel the presence of God. Maybe that is why it is so disheartening for some when they go to a church hoping to encounter a living God and find only a dead congregation in a lifeless worship service. A church can be an awfully empty feeling place.

We've all heard people say that they feel closer to God in the mountains or the ocean, or even the golf course than in a church. Now maybe they are just making excuses for not going to church. Maybe they just cannot stomach sound doctrine. Or maybe, just maybe, they are speaking from honest experience. Maybe they have gotten really tired of visiting God's house when God is obviously not there.

There were lots of shrines for lots of gods in the ancient world. The thing that made Solomon's temple different from all the shrines in town was that on the day it was dedicated, God actually showed up and moved in. We read this in verse 11, "When the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord."

We read about this cloud of the Lord drifting into lots of places throughout scripture. For example, it hovered over Mount Sinai when Moses climbed up to meet God, the place where God gave him the ten commandments. And the great holy cloud led the children of Israel all through their wilderness wanderings. And, later on it surrounded Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration.

The cloud was God's way of letting people know He was present. The people could not actually see God, but at least they could see where God was. The cloud was a sign to the Israelites that they were in a very sacred place. And whenever God is in a place, you can be sure, things get really intimate.

The concept of sacred places, places where we feel closer to God more than other places does not conflict with the principle that God is in every place. Clearly, Solomon did not see the two principles as conflicting with each other. He knew that no human-made structure could house God, and yet he felt divinely compelled to build a dwelling place for God. **It was not that God needed a place like that. It was that God's people needed a place like that.**

Lance Sawyer, one-time pastor of First Baptist Church in Muskogee, Oklahoma wrote this about Solomon, "Solomon understood that the "heaven and the highest heaven" (verse 27) could not contain God. Solomon was saying here, even more than he realized. He did not know that from Earth to the edge of the visible universe is 46.5 billion light years in any direction. But in essence he was saying that in all of that space there is not a single spot where God is not."

This is just as mindboggling to adults as it is to children. A little boy once asked his Sunday school teacher, "Where is God?" "God is everywhere," she replied. "Is God in my inkwell?" "Uh, yes," answered the teacher, "I suppose so." "Then I got him!" replied the boy as he clamped his hand over the top.

Is God in an inkwell? Is God in your car? In your shopping cart at the store? In your lunch box? Your house or apartment? Your vacation hotel? Is God in our Sunday School rooms?

I suppose so. Yet, there are specific places where God chooses to make God's presence known – places where God seems to make himself at home. A church is supposed to be one of those places. But we all know that there are some churches where God's presence is seemingly absent. People can feel that too.

Just as God's presence can be found in a church, God's presence can be absent from a church. That doesn't happen because of God, it happens because of the people in the church. The sad thing is that religious activity can go on with or without God's involvement. I call this playing church. Religious activity is a sad substitute for a genuine experience with God.

A worship service can be planned, a sermon can be shared, hymns can be sung, even prayers can be offered, but it can all be meaningless and empty. We can go through the motions of doing church, but we cannot conjure up God's presence with emotional hype. We cannot control God's movement.

If we want God to make himself at home in our churches, we need to prepare our churches for God's purposes, not our own. Some of the things that make a church appealing and inviting to God might make people feel uncomfortable. For example, few Christians are comfortable admitting that they are empty, void of God's Spirit in their lives, and that worship really means nothing to them, they are indeed just going through the motions.

Again, I want to quote Pastor Lance Sawyer because I agree with him when he says, "I do not know that honesty and integrity alone will draw God into our places of worship, but I do know dishonesty and hypocrisy will keep him away. Jesus promised that the "pure in heart, will see God," and that those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness, will be filled" (Matthew 5:6-8). There is apparently something about an earnest desire for God that attracts God. I guess even God likes to feel wanted."

Every Sunday for nearly three years Walter had a routine. Just before 10:00 a.m. he would open the doors to Epworth and prepare the church for worship. If the weather was cold, he would build a fire in the old wood stove. If it was hot, he would open all the windows and distribute the hand fans with a picture of Jesus on one side and an ad for a local funeral home on the other.

Next, Walter would open the Bible located on top of the wooden pulpit and read the selected Scripture for that week. Then it would be time for prayer. Often there were folks in the community included on Walter's list. The latest national and world news would be mentioned. But always, Walter ended every prayer with a plea for God to remember and bless his beloved church.

Every Sunday, Walter had a routine, but what makes this story so unique is that with very few exceptions, Walter began and ended the Sunday morning worship service, alone. Alone? Why? Many years ago, Epworth church was built on land donated by a neighboring farmer, but if for any reason they stopped meeting regularly, if Walter stopped opening the church doors every Sunday, the property would revert to the original owners, Epworth church would cease to exist.

So, what is the big deal? If Walter is the only one bothering to attend, let him go somewhere else or stay at home. Why not face the inevitable and allow Epworth to quietly disappear? What harm would it do? For Walter, it was a big deal. God had a divine purpose for his life and for the church he loved. But for now, Walter must be patient, be faithful and wait. Wait for what?

One Sunday morning a young family, new to the area, visited Epworth and after meeting Walter joined him in worship. They found something unique about this little church nestled

among the trees and the old man who faithfully opened her doors. On the following Sunday they came back and within a few weeks the children were bringing friends. At year's end a minister was hired.

Today, Epworth is a small family church situated between several farms and hidden among the trees. Every summer they offer vacation Bible school for the neighborhood and each Christmas is celebrated with a pageant performed by the children. Many of the original family have died and some of the children have moved away, but the miracle of Epworth has never been forgotten.

On the first Sunday of August, people come from across the United States to visit the church of their youth and relive the miracle of the old man who refused to let his beloved church die. The worship service is followed by a picnic on the church grounds. While the children are playing and the adults are eating, you may notice a family wandering over to the nearby cemetery. If you listen carefully, you'll hear a parent telling her child, "Let me tell you a story about Walter."

This space, this sanctuary is a sacred space. It's a place filled with God's presence. God knows He is wanted and so God's cloud can be seen through our need and desire for God, through our worship of God. Over the years, some of us have come from other denominations, to make one beloved family and we all gather as one body, sometimes, not in-person during the pandemic, and times like today when we are being cautious not to spread COVID after some of us having been exposed to it here, still we gather through the use of technology, to find peace and encouragement in this sacred space because we know God is here. When we have visitors or new people attend, we welcome them into this sacred space. And, when we leave this sacred space, God goes with us, within the sacred space of our souls, until we meet again. Amen.