

We Are Yours, O God
We are the Temples You Send
1 Kings 5:1-5; 8:1-13, 27
Northminster Presbyterian Church
October 29, 2017
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Solomon was wise, Solomon was wealthy, and when he thought he could build an eternal dwelling place for God, he was wrong. When he said, “I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever,” maybe, caught up in the splendor of the edifice he had built, he briefly believed that would be true. But by the time he gets to the prayer of dedication it’s as though, in the midst of prayer, he can see that this vision can’t be right — no place can hold God and certainly not forever.

When 1 Kings was finally written down, it was already not right. These annals of the Kingdom of Israel were written, we believe, in the time of the Babylonian exile, over 500 years before Christ and several hundred years after Solomon uttered these words. That Temple had been destroyed, burned to the ground as a part of that same exile. Even the writers could not know that a second Temple would be rebuilt after the exile, and that about 45 years after Jesus’ public ministry ended, THAT temple would be destroyed after another Jewish uprising.

What is now the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is all that is left — not of the temple, but of the wall around the courtyard of the temple. The place in which Yahweh was supposed to dwell forever was destroyed not once, but twice. Even Jesus mocked the idea of the permanence of the Temple multiple times in the gospels. “Things” that are supposed to be permanent apparently make God laugh.

The Ark of the Covenant was created to hold the tablets that contained the Ten Commandments, from back in Moses’ time. We all know what it supposedly looked like, right? We’ve seen the Indiana Jones movie. But the reality is that there have been no sightings of the Ark since the FIRST destruction of the temple at the start of the Babylonian exile. It’s almost as if the writers, assuming we know the end of the story, want to show the fruitlessness of all this pomp and circumstance. Or perhaps they want to remember the promise and hope that existed at the time the temple was first built, a time when the people felt sure that God would always be with them.

Still, it does seem like a lot of fuss for THINGS, things that were intended to be eternal but things that will be long gone even before Jesus’ time, and that Solomon knows can’t hold a God anyway. So, why make such a big deal about a building? Why make such a big deal about the symbolic presence of God in the midst of the people? You might as well ask, why the font? Why the table? Why the church?

So let’s ask that. It seems like an important question on this 500th anniversary of the Reformation when we remember not just Luther and his 95 theses, but John Calvin who stripped the church of all non-essential things. And as we continue in our commitment season for the coming year and have to think about the care and upkeep of this beautiful space, we may ask, why is this place important?

Well, what was the temple for in Solomon's day? It was the center of worship — check, we fit that one. It was the center of the church's charitable work; the receptacles all around the temple complex were where people presented their alms to the poor and oppressed. That sounds familiar too. It was the place where God was said to live — maybe didn't stay, but at least lived.

And here's where we run into a problem. If you grew up in the church maybe you too heard it growing up. "We're going to God's house." It was a way to make sure that we behaved in church; it was a way to instruct us into having respect for faith and worship. But maybe it also taught us something we really need to let go of because God doesn't live here — in these four walls — at least no more than God lives in the houses across the street or in Curt's Cafe around the corner or in either of the Starbucks on Central.

This building was built in the late 1920s and the newer addition in the late 1950s. Did God not live here before then? After the massive renovation 65 years ago that gave us the narthex and the tower entrance and the education building, did God live here more or better? The church and its buildings do not exist to provide a place for God to dwell, because God dwells, as we are told by our Reformed tradition, here and there and there and there — in each of us. The gift of faith is our awakening to the Spirit of God moving in and dwelling in each of us — claiming us, comforting us, challenging us, companionship us, even carrying us, depending on how the day is going.

When God came among us in Jesus, part of what we learned was that God's spirit could not be contained — could not even be contained by heaven, for God was here; could not be contained by a building, for Jesus went out among the people; could not be contained by one tradition or religion, for Jesus welcomed Jew and Gentile alike; could not be contained by death, for Jesus was crucified and raised to new life. All of the things we thought we knew about God — at least all of the limitations we placed on God — just didn't hold up.

So does that mean that Solomon was wasting his time? Does that mean that when we get up next Saturday to clean the pews and the pulpit we are wasting our time? Does it mean that we are wasting money when we pay the electric bill or repair the furnace? These are legitimate questions to ask as we consider stewardship of our time, talents, finances and resources. What's a church building for if it's not a dwelling place for God?

The doorbell buzzed on a warm Friday afternoon a few years ago. I'd gotten a call a few days before from someone who read about me being called to be the pastor here. He wanted to talk to someone and I sounded as good as anyone else, so could we meet? I don't get those requests from strangers too often, but when I do, I always try to be accommodating. And so I asked his name — let's call him Dave — and I agreed to speak with him and pray with him.

He arrived not quite sure he had made the right choice but after a few moments it all began to come out — how he had been institutionalized as a young man; how he had struggled with mental illness his entire life; how he now was facing a terminal diagnosis sometime in the next few years, and how it wasn't fair. And he was right.

We met a handful of times over the next two years. Once or twice he would go and just sit in the sanctuary before or after we met — just to be. Some of you know how his story ended. This man was raised in another tradition, and never fully embraced ours. His memorial service was here at his request not too long ago.

I ask you — what was this building for Dave that day? What was the ministry that you support being for Dave that day and in the later times he was here? First it was a place, a safe place, a place where there was no judging, a place where he could come away, even for only a few minutes, from a world that seemed to be coming after him. Yes, he continued to need medical help beyond what we could provide but for a few moments every few months, this was a place where he could take ahold of life when it seemed to be getting away from him, where he could hear how he was beloved of God. This church was a way station for him, a place of welcome and rest for the journey that awaited.

Every week do you know how many groups or individuals are in one corner of our space or another? It's not uncommon for us to have a week were between Monday morning Al-Anon meetings and Saturday night Boy Scout sleepovers that more than 300 women, men and children travel through our doors — from Samaritan Center clients to Mom's Morning Out toddlers to folks making soup or sandwiches to be served somewhere else.

What is this place for the Boy Scouts and the Nursery School toddlers, for our Al-Anon friends and for the later in life newly minted actors, writers and directors of 2nd Act Players? Not a dwelling place of God, but a safe place, a place to build community, to build or rebuild lives, to start a new chapter, to grow into the people God knows they can be, to build, shape or rebuild lives through grace, love, creativity and commitment? Is any of that a waste? Does any of that say God lives here as opposed to out on the front lawn?

About 500 years ago, Martin Luther said the church had become a place that sought to imprison grace within its walls and liturgies. John Calvin thought it had become too much of a showplace where extravagance and entertainment and emotion-catching spectacle had gotten in the way of grace, faithfulness and Godly obedience. They both sought to simplify, to get back to the basics.

So let me get as basic as I can here. I want to suggest it's not that God lives here, it's that this is a place where people — others and us — can find God — not in these walls but within themselves and within one another — where they and we can be renewed and get the strength to go out into the world where God is living and working, among the good people and the troubled people and people in need and the people who want to help. The Reformation taught us that this idea — that we were in-dwelling places of God, that we didn't need an intermediary other than Jesus to be in full relationship to a God — is called the priesthood of all believers, a cornerstone of both Luther and Calvin's theologies.

We formally worship in this building — on the busiest week of the year a total of 5 or 6 hours. But God is worshipped here and God is working here many more hours than that, and far more hours than I am here each week.

And so maybe this is God's house — not because God lives here but because here God is repairing and building new temples every day. God is building us, preparing us to be the new temples in the world that Christ is sending out in love and grace. This is a place where God is sought, acknowledged, encountered and worshiped because we have decided, and the Spirit has inspired us to believe, that such a place needs to exist — not so that God has a place to make a home here but so that everyone else who seeks that home finds a place of welcome — whether it's for a sweet hour of prayer, a two hour meeting, a session of Mom's Morning Out, or even a lifetime.

Because we experience the loving, gracing indwelling of the Spirit, we seek to create a space for that love to be encountered. But we leave the hosting and the sending to the Spirit, who already has a place to live — in the temple of every heart, in every one of us who leave this place to love, to serve, to work, to bless. Thanks be to God.