

Where God Lives

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Sunday December 21, 2014
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Luke 1:26-38

I.

Some of us spend our lives trying to figure out where God lives. In our hearts we long for a sacred place. We keep looking: some trying to build a House; some trying to figure out if we are allowed in; some not sure where to look.

Long ago King David planned to build God a house, in Jerusalem, the city David had invaded and turned into his royal city. David had trouble getting the Ark of God (“Ark of the Covenant”) into Jerusalem! And once it was there, he wanted to build a temple for it. “See now,” David said to Nathan his advisor, “I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent.” Nathan responded saying that since God loved everything David did, David ought to go ahead as seemed good!

The problem with Nathan’s first response was that he was speaking out of his own self-interest—Just as David was planning his construction project, not for God, but for his own benefit! And so late at night, God, who knows hearts, showed up, and had a word for Nathan! “Go and tell my servant David, “Thus says the Lord: Would you build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling...”

God’s response to David’s desire to build an edifice went like this—“What makes you think that I want YOU to build ME a nice house? I am the God who takes care of you on the road, who plants you and nurtures you for my garden. I don’t need you to build me a house. Not you, David, not now.

God was and is the God of the traveler, the God of the pilgrim, the God of the people wandering in the desert. God in all those years preferred tents to houses, preferred not to be fixed down to an edifice or institution. God liked to be free in order to go where God’s people were most in need! Then as now, God was bigger than any house, free to choose where to be and how to act, how to love and where to make God’s presence felt. So it was with Abram and Sarai, leaving the land of their birth and setting out for Canaan. So it was for Moses and the people wandering in the desert of Sinai. So it is with us.

II.

In India, when I was a child, we worshiped in the St Andrew's Kirk, a huge structure it seemed to a little child, a big old building. I met a living presence there! So in some ways I have spent my life looking for the Living Holy Presence in big grand old crumbling buildings, some made of stone, some of brick, some of pine and cedar, some of stucco and steel. Yet sometimes it feels like I am looking in the wrong places—and then this living Spirit finds me on its own terms, whether in some old structure, or on the sidewalk outside.

Some years ago I was driving through the city of Rochester, and passed an old converted school bus, that said *Poor People United* on the outside. Below it said "A triage unit for a world at War" or something like that. It was the bus that drove around at night, making sure people didn't die when the temperature dipped too low for those who had either chosen to stay away from shelters, or had no choice.... As I went by that dilapidated bus, I wondered if this is what the House of God really looks like! I had a sudden longing to get on that bus to find God.

On some instinctive intuitive level, you and I understand that God is too big, too free, too wild, to be pinned down in a church or a temple, a hall of government—or an ecclesiastical office. Somewhere in our innards we know that there is One who is bigger than our statues, our agendas, our projections. Somewhere in our insides we get it, that God will not be fooled by our flattery or take up exclusive residence in our palaces, however pretty. God might prefer some nights to stay on a bus in Rochester—or under a bridge in Schenectady, or in a battle zone anywhere.

III.

At this season of the year when we remember how the family of Jesus had to leave one town and travel to another, to be numbered and registered and kept account of by the rulers of that day, we are grateful for the God who doesn't choose to be known in brick and stone, but rather through the movement and growth and discovery of people—all kinds of people, in every walk of life. We may wish with part of ourselves that we could get God to cooperate a little more with the Program, but we are secretly relieved that there is this Being that refuses to be ruled by us, and would rather be making us new, all over again.

Nonetheless, at this time of year we also acknowledge that God indeed decided, somewhere back there, to take up residence among human beings. We tell an old old story that expresses our conviction that God chose to dwell, to build a house, not a temple built by human hands, but in human flesh right in the midst of human dreams, human promises broken and redeemed. As we

mark the days to Christmas, we confess that in the little town of Bethlehem we discover once again that God didn't need a house made of wood or stone because God preferred to be housed in human flesh and bone, in human suffering and human longing, among God's people, some of them people at the very edge of it all. So God chose to show up not in the temple on a hilltop, but rather in the hills outside of Bethlehem, in a manger outside the inns, in a child of royal lineage and no lineage at all.

In the first letter of Peter, chapter 2, we find a passage that tells us what the early church took away from its experience of meeting God in human flesh, housed in a baby, born, born in Bethlehem. "Come to the Lord, the living stone rejected by people as worthless but chosen by God as valuable. Come as living stones, and let yourselves be used in building the spiritual temple, where you will serve as holy priests to offer spiritual and acceptable sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ. "

Several years after the life of Jesus we find that the people of the early church believed that because of Jesus, *they* were now a living house for God to dwell in and among. Living stones, they thought they were called to be, living stones in a temple whose cornerstone was the broken life of Jesus.

They understood that humankind could meet God living in them—a daring notion: in their love, in their witness, in their faithfulness! And they knew it wasn't just correct doctrine or orthodox practice that kept them together. No, they saw and felt, they knew deeply, that it was a very real God who brought them together, held them together with grace and love. They believed that it was a sacred Spirit that turned them from bits of this and that, broken stones, dry bones, into a living house, a sacred people. "Once," says the writer, "you were no people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

IV.

What is it, to BE the house where God lives? Is it finding a place where people who had been rejected and people who had been defeated came together with those who had done the rejecting, those who had been considered the victors? It might mean finding a place where hearts of stone are turned into burning breathing fires of love. It might mean creating a place where people, just plain people, started coming together out of their lostness, out of their fear, out of their mistrust. It **does** mean creating a community where ordinary lives become living pieces of a new thing, a new community, a new hope, a new experiment in truth.

What is it to be the place where God lives? It is learning again that while the old institutions are dying out, old power structures crumbling, a new people is coming into being! It is figuring out that when the temples of the past

fall down what is left is the people, daring to try to follow in the footsteps of Love.

V.

What an inspiring and terrifying and lovely thing! God has found a place to live—right here with you and me! For God is not afraid to bless us, and to be with us, however struggling our efforts, however tiny our successes. God is not afraid to break through our limits and our fears, our pretenses and our ambitions. God can take a stone rejected by the builders, and God can take lives that don't look like much—and God can make a people, fit to carry good news on the road. God can make a community able to carry hope, and able to give real love.

Each of us has our failings—and each of us has our gifts. Each of us has our fears, and each of us can, if we ask for help, discover the courage, so that together we might start being the living house of God. We might not feel solid enough, big enough! But remember—God isn't looking for grand quarters! God prefers the tent of a human life.

Look within! Look among us. Look around where we least expected to find anything holy. We stand in a Holy Presence, a living Being, bigger than we are, but within us; wider than we are but among us. This God is not just with one people or nation, but with all of humankind.

We stand in the presence of the Holy. We find ourselves held in fragile but holy human hands. This is the Good News of Jesus!

Emmanuel: God with us in human form.

Friedens: the peace of God, in human flesh.

This is where God lives. Amen.