

Where Does God Dwell?

Sacred Texts for Beloved Community 1

By
The Reverend Dr. Agnes Norfleet
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1 Kings 7:48-8:7

⁴⁸ So Solomon made all the vessels that were in the house of the Lord: the golden altar, the golden table for the bread of the Presence, ⁴⁹ the lampstands of pure gold, five on the south side and five on the north, in front of the inner sanctuary; the flowers, the lamps, and the tongs, of gold; ⁵⁰ the cups, snuffers, basins, dishes for incense, and firepans, of pure gold; the sockets for the doors of the innermost part of the house, the most holy place, and for the doors of the main hall of the temple, of gold.

⁵¹ Thus all the work that King Solomon did on the house of the Lord was finished. Solomon brought in the things that his father David had dedicated, the silver, the gold, and the vessels, and stored them in the treasuries of the house of the Lord. 8 Then Solomon assembled the elders

of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of the city of David, which is Zion. ² All the people of Israel assembled to King Solomon at the festival in the month Ethanim, which is the seventh month. ³ And all the elders of Israel came, and the priests carried the ark. ⁴ So they brought up the ark of the Lord, the tent of meeting, and all the holy vessels that were in the tent; the priests and the Levites brought them up. ⁵ King Solomon and all the congregation of Israel, who had assembled before him, were with him before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and oxen that they could not be counted or numbered. ⁶ Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. ⁷ For the cherubim spread out their wings over the place of the ark, so that the cherubim made a covering above the ark and its poles.

1 Kings 8:22-30

²² Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of the whole assembly of Israel and spread out his hands to heaven. ²³ He said, “O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love with your servants who walk before you with all their heart, ²⁴ the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand. ²⁵ Therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant my father David that which you promised him, saying, ‘There shall never fail you a successor before me to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your children look to their way, to

walk before me as you have walked before me.’²⁶ Therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed that you promised to your servant my father David.²⁷ “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!²⁸ Regard your servant’s prayer and his plea, O LORD my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today,²⁹ that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place.³⁰ Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; hear and forgive.

My family knows that I am fond of star-gazing, and have never passed a planetarium I didn’t want to enter to spend an hour transported far into the night sky. Last Christmas our son Winston gave me the newly published book, *Webb’s Universe*. It’s a picture book of recent photographs from the Webb telescope - black holes collapsing, clouds of gas and dust giving birth to new stars, stunning images of rings and moons around far away planets. So last Christmas, all four of us gathered in the living room; I’m flipping through the book, and arrive at a two page spread showing thousands of swirling galaxies, impossible to count. That deep-field view of the universe shows amazing colorful splendor from as far as a billion light years away. In that moment of awe and wonder, I muttered something like... “And I believe in a God who knows me by name and hears my little prayers? When I look at this – I’m not so sure.” To which

one of my boys said, “Mom, I don’t think you should say things like that out loud,” and the other rejoined, “Yep, it’s time for Mom to retire.”

Solomon’s Prayer of Dedication at the grand new Temple - built to house the presence of God – called to mind that interchange. How we, as people of faith, live in the tension between wanting some certainty about Who God Is and where God is to be found and how – amid the expanse and glories of creation God interacts with our relatively small lives and worldviews. Especially just now when it feels like the world is at a tipping point. Relatively stable Post World War Two national alliances are being realigned. Our country is experiencing a health care debate that feels unhinged. Not long ago we thought the horrific wars in Ukraine and Gaza would be over by now, yet they have worsened in unimaginable ways. Where is the God of peace we so desperately want to show up in hostage holding underground tunnels, or among bombed out, famished people lining up for food in Palestine? Where is the God of the poor needed in the remote mountains of Afghanistan quaking with the aftershocks of devastation? Where is the Jesus who heals among this chaotic vaccine debate? In our country where gunfire has become the number one killer of children, where is the Jesus we long to walk our city streets again?

I understand why my preacher’s-kid young adult sons think I ought to keep my doubts to myself - especially on the afternoon of Christmas Day - but I’ve come to see that it takes a maturity of faith to hold that tension of sure belief together with uncertainty, with a reverence for mystery. It takes a measure of spiritual wisdom to become comfortable with those places where what we believe bumps up against what we will never know or understand fully.

Solomon is best known for his wisdom. The son of King David, whose military might unified the kingdom of God's covenant people, Solomon was gifted with a spirit of understanding and sound judgment, a keen discernment between right and wrong, a practical application of fairness. Solomon's wisdom is described as even having a transcendent quality. The Bible says he lived in close relationship with God; he is described repeatedly as person of prayer, a life-long student of God's ways. Solomon's wisdom, I like to believe, is the kind of wisdom all of us yearn for. Especially on a day like today, when we celebrate beginning a new program year filled with opportunities for faith formation, Christian Education, and the nurture of corporate worship, music and fellowship. Solomon's Prayer of Dedication over the new Temple encourages us on this day of recommitting ourselves to grow in faith. He is standing before the whole nation to dedicate this grand new house of God, built according to a blueprint intended to show that God is great and God is with the people.

One commentator wrote: "The Temple had to be seen to be believed. It stood three stories high, and you entered it through a soaring porch of Egyptian design, that was flanked by two thirty-foot free-standing bronze columns with carved lilies on top. It had cedar ceilings, cypress floors, and olivewood doors, and the amount of gold they used to trim it inside and out would have bankrupted Fort Knox."¹ It took seven years to finish this magnificent Temple to house the Ark of the Covenant and to be the worthy residence for the living God.

So on this glorious day of dedication, Solomon declares that this will be a place of prayer, of national unity, of comfort for the sorrowful, and a holy

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, p. 159

dwelling of divine presence. He proclaims that people will come from distant lands, because they will hear the great name of Yahweh. He prays that God will answer the prayers of the foreigner who comes to this Temple so that all the people of the earth may know God's name. The grandeur of the Temple is matched by the eloquence of Solomon's words of dedication, just what you would expect of a great leader at such a moment of national self-congratulation, religious celebration, and royal pride.

However, right in the middle of the prayer, at the very heart of it, King Solomon says something surprising. As if to stop his own petition, Solomon asks, "Will God indeed dwell on earth? Even heaven, and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house which I have built." Therein lies the kind of wisdom Solomon possessed. The question he asks - right there, mid-prayer is more profound than any answer he will give, any judgment he will make, any royal decree he will ever proclaim. Will God indeed dwell on earth?

If I could put into a sentence my deepest yearning and my highest aspiration for the Christian education and nurture of this congregation, it would be something like this: I envision a church where everyone who enters our doors feels safe asking the questions that lead to the living God. To dwell within Solomon's walls should be a safe place to ask questions about God, questions about life, questions about death, questions offered in prayer. Because that is what I think Solomon's prayer means for us, that where God dwells, is often on the far end of our deepest questions.

Does this mean we at Bryn Mawr do not have any answers? Of course not. Rather, it means we seek to be a community that honors the questions of

faith that all of us naturally have. It means that gathered together for worship, in Bible studies and classes and Connections Groups, in Choir and children's classrooms, in safe spaces for adolescent honesty, in shared joys and shouldered sorrows, we grow to trust in a God who ultimately dwells in a realm of mystery that surpasses our understanding. Those who seek Solomon's kind of wisdom come to understand we cannot pin God down, we cannot locate God within a particular place, or framework or worldview anymore that we can nail Jesus down, or shut him up in a solid rock hewn tomb, and expect him to stay there. Ours is a God who spangles the heavens with bright lights and endless galaxies; and who takes up residence in the human heart. To live with the question, Where does God dwell? Is, in itself, a life-giving declaration of faith.

An astute observer of contemporary Christianity, Theologian Cornelius Plantinga, has written with concern that a lot of people are secretly tired of God, or at least tired of the God we hear presumably pious people chatter about. He writes: "We hear so much talk about God with half a mind, and launch prayers with half a heart, and because of a barrage of bumper sticker piety, billboard piety, radio and television and sing-song piety people are actually more detached from God. But, he asserts, "most persons would listen on their knees to anyone who would make God real to them, but nobody should underestimate the challenge of making God real. He goes on: "It must penetrate people who have been so stuffed with the good news of God that the news no longer sounds to them very good or very new... What we need to hear is a tart and astringent God for people with too much spiritual fat in their diet, an angular God for people who have become too familiar with God, a militant God to straighten the spines of Christians who have slumped into sentimentality..." Then he tempers his remarks saying, "We not only need to hear that God is great and God is

good, but also that God is elusive and God is strange, because that is what the Bible says, and our spiritual health depends on it... Let's hear the truth then not only about God, but also about us, people who look so much like God, and have wandered so far from God, and who so urgently need the grace of God that is full of pain and full of wonder.”²

Friends, with painful recognition and no small amount of wonder, after building the biggest, most beautiful house of worship ever constructed, Solomon knew that nothing on earth, and nothing in heaven, could contain God, much less the house that he had built. Likewise, what those of us who commit ourselves to Christian Education discover is that instead of just being a place to find God here, the church offers a lens through which to see glimpses of God everywhere. When you read the bible with this guiding question, “*Where does God dwell?*” you will find so many wonderfully evocative answers: Temple, ark, cloud, glory, name, tent, deep darkness, light, prayer, Jesus of Nazareth, rainbow, banquet, wilderness...God dwells even in the image and likeness of one another, of every human person.

And then, by that kind of Biblical understanding, we will discover that one or more of the things we have learned at church will help us find God in school, work, home, neighborhood, mission field, hospital, cemetery, in our actions, doing justice, loving kindness, wherever we are. “*Where does God dwell?*” Always, and ever, at the far end of that question.

AMEN.

² Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., A God for Evangelicals who are Stuffed with God,” The Living Pulpit, p.8