

“Where Does God Dwell?”
delivered Sunday, August 23, 2009 – Rally Day
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1 Kings 8:5-6,22-23, 27-30

Solomon is known for his wisdom. Just as the gift of the Law is identified with Moses, and the Psalms with King David, throughout the bible Solomon is always remembered for his wisdom. Then, as now, wisdom was understood as a gift of discernment and sound judgment. But the kind of wisdom Solomon possesses is also associated with the wisdom of God; it has a transcendent quality that surpasses ordinary human wisdom that comes to anyone with enough life experience. Solomon’s wisdom emanates from a life lived in a close relationship with God. He is described repeatedly as person of prayer, and First Kings records long prayers that he prayed. He is a life-long student of the ways of God. Solomon’s wisdom is the kind of wisdom all of us are after - I like to believe - on Rally Day when we recommit and rededicate ourselves and this church to Christian Education.

Near the beginning of his reign, one of Solomon’s prayers led him to Jerusalem to build a magnificent Temple for the worship of God. Our scripture reading this morning is excerpted from Solomon’s prayer of dedication at its completion. He is standing before the whole nation and dedicates the grand new house of God, built according to a blueprint intended to show that God is great and God is ever on the side of his people. “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) The Bible goes into great detail about its architectural plans, the hand-carved décor, objects of art, golden altar and lamp stands, the censers of gold, even the door sockets. It took Solomon 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 ever a holy place 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. But right in the middle of the prayer, at the very heart of it, King Solomon says something surprising. Mid-prayer, 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 is more profound than any answer he will ever give. If I could put into a sentence my deepest yearning and my highest aspiration for Shandon’s Christian education program it would be something like this: I envision a church where everyone who enters our doors feels safe asking the questions that lead us 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 or in jest or even in anger. That’s where God dwells – on the far end of all our questions.

Does this mean, we at Shandon, do not have any answers? Of course not. Rather, it means we seek to be a community that honors all the questions of faith that we have, as those who seek the wisdom of Solomon who came to understand we cannot pin God down, we cannot locate God only within the walls of this church or any particular place, we cannot even nail him to a tree, shut him up in a solid rock hewn tomb, and expect him to stay there. Ours is a God on the loose.

An astute observer of American Christianity, Cornelius Plantinga, has written with concern that a lot of people are secretly tired of God. 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 hymn-sing 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 writes: "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)

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 a being a place to find God only here, the church offers a lens through which to see glimpses of God wherever we go. Through Bible study, discussion and asking our questions in community with one another a mysterious but undeniable presence emerges. 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, bread, road, wilderness....And then depending on where you really need to see God most, you will discover that one or more of the things you have learned in church school will help you find God in school, work, home, war, neighborhood, mission field, hospital, cemetery, supper, camping, sanctuary...wherever you are. "Where does God dwell?" Always, and ever, at the far end of that question. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, p. 159.
- 2) Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "A God for Evangelicals Who Are Stuffed with God," *The Living Pulpit*, January-March, 1997, p. 8.