Will You Be Here
1 Kings 8:1-2, 22-30

On this last Sunday in August we conclude our summer series looking at the life of David and his son Solomon. And it feels fitting to conclude this series with the completion and dedication of the temple. Because everything's really been leading us here.

> David becoming king, conquering Jerusalem and making it the religious capital of Israel,
>
> wanting to build a temple,
>
> being told his son would build the temple,
>
> and finally, the temple is built.

The land is secure, the throne is established, and God has promised that he will now dwell among his people in this specific way, here in this place, in this temple.

It's taken eleven years to build the temple. It's beautiful, elegant, extravagant, made following a precise blueprint. It's a masterpiece of a building – but it's useless unless God actually dwells within it. So, Solomon brings the ark of the covenant inside the temple, into the Holy of Holies. In front of all the assembled people, the priests and the Levites place the ark beneath the wings of the cherubim. And – as had happened in the tabernacle, hundreds of years before, the glory of the Lord fills the house, fills the Holy of Holies, a great cloud filling the whole room.

Solomon then addresses the crowd of Israelites who are gathered together and recounts the story of how they got here. He tells of God's faithfulness to his father David, and of God's faithfulness to his promise

that David's son would sit on the throne and would build for the Lord a house where he might dwell.

And then Solomon prays. Again, he begins by praising God for his faithfulness, for keeping his covenant, for maintaining his steadfast love to his people, to David, to Solomon.

Then…the mood of the prayer changes. Solomon poses a question, a very legitimate question: "Will God indeed dwell on the earth?"

God has promised to be here, to be present in this temple, in this house. But as God had told David, God is God of the whole universe! "Even heaven and the *highest* heaven cannot contain you", says Solomon. So, of course, this house, grand though it may be, cannot contain the presence of God.

There is an incredulity here. A ludicrousness. The God who hung the stars in the sky is to be present within four walls? If this were only Solomon's expectation, if this was just something he was telling God to do, we would laugh in Solomon's face. Oh, the audacity of it! But Solomon didn't come up with this idea. Solomon isn't going off some whim.

God has promised to be present there. God has promised – not to be contained by the temple – but to dwell there in a special, specific way.

So, Solomon's prayer is a petition that God remember his promise. That God *would* be present there. That God would hear the prayers of his people which are directed toward the place where God has promised to be.

Listen to how many times Solomon uses language of listening, of heeding, of paying attention, in just these four verses from 27-30. "Regard your servant's prayer; heeding the cry and the prayer; heed the prayer; hear the plea; O hear in heaven, heed and forgive."

It's incredibly repetitive. And when I read it, when I hear that repetition, I hear desperation in Solomon's voice. A deep guttural desire for God to do what he says he'll do, for God to be near to Solomon and to the people, for God to pay attention. Hear us. Be with us.

Please. Please. Please.

I get that desperation right now. Sometimes pastors run the risk of reading their own emotions too much onto a text, but I'd wager a bet that many of you understand that sense of desperation right now. That most of us – if not all of us – can pray a very similar prayer today.

"You've said you're going to be with us, God. You've said you will be present to us, that you'll be involved, that your hand will shield and protect us, that you'll go before to guide and behind to protect and beneath to support and beside to befriend. You've promised to strengthen us, to heal us, to heal your land. You've promised to bring peace and comfort where there is war and division. You've promised to be with us.

Will you be? Will you be here? God of heaven and earth, God who is beyond our reckoning, beyond our capacity to imagine, who cannot be contained – will you indeed dwell on the earth? Will you be with us? And will you be with us here in this place?"

Because this place – this church - maybe feels for many of us like it's not quite the refuge it once was. Or we don't experience the same joy when we come here today that we once did. For some of us, coming to church these days is hard.

I know there are people in this congregation who look around on a Sunday morning and see all the people who aren't here, all the people who have left over the last few years, and it breaks your heart.

I know there are people in this congregation who no longer feel like the denomination is their home, so they're wondering if this church can still be their home.

I know there are people in this congregation who are just plain tired. Between Covid and the Human Sexuality Report, the last four years have been hard. We've experienced pain here. And so coming into this space feels like stepping into a hard place.

So we're praying the same prayer Solomon is praying. "God…are you here? Are you with us? Does your presence indeed fill this place? Do you, in fact, still hold your church, this church, in the palm of your hands?"

The answer to Solomon's prayer is found in the middle of it.

All this repetition…it actually forms a chiasm – a way of structuring a paragraph or sentence with mirrored phrases to emphasize the middle of it.

So we have vs. 27: "Will God dwell on the earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven cannot contain you…" mirrored in vs. 30: "Hear from heaven, your dwelling place".

Vs. 28, "Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence today" finds repetition in the end of vs. 29: "hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place."

And in the middle is God's declaration, God's promise: the temple is the place of which God said, "My name shall be there."

"Yes," says God. "You ask if I will indeed dwell on the earth, and the answer is yes. Not despite my greatness and power, but because of them. Because I am who I am, I will give you what you need. I will give you what you need to know that I am here."

This is why God allowed Solomon to build the temple in the first place. When David first told God he wanted to build God a temple, God replied, “You think I need a house? Who am I to be contained by four walls?”

Of course, God doesn’t need a house.

But we do.

We need a place to go, we need a place to be reminded, we need a place, physical and tangible, that assures us of God’s presence among us.

Because while God is vast and almighty and limitless, we are not.

John Calvin was once asked, “Does God need baptism to save us? Surely God is not so limited to such creaturely conventions.”

Calvin replied, “Of course, God is not limited in any way. God needs nothing to accomplish his purposes. But unlike God, we creatures are limited. The ways of God are too far beyond our comprehension.”

So God stoops to us.

He gives us tangible signs, physical places, names and images we can know and understand, all of which act as anchors of our faith.

The water of baptism. The bread of Communion. The wooden crosses above our doors. A church sanctuary.

Will Willimon, former dean of the chapel at Duke University, said this in a sermon commemorating fifty-one years of the chapel:

“God stoops to us. Time and again we have gathered here bereft, discouraged, defeated, cut off from God and one another. We have brought our questions, our doubts. We have sung our hymns of praise and this God, the same God who is higher than the highest heavens and

beyond even our grandest ideals, this one has come to us in this house which we have built and hallowed it with his presence. It's called "a house of God" because in this place, God has not deemed it an unworthy thing to stoop to us."

God has not deemed it an unworthy thing to stoop to us.

In fact, God stooped so far towards us, that he became one of us.

When the people rebelled against God and against his commands – when the temple was no longer a place where the people experienced God's fullness, when its rituals and rites couldn't bridge the divide between God and his people – when God needed something new, needed a new covenant – he stooped even lower.

The fullness of God – all his grandeur and might – dwelt within the body of a human.

So says Colossians 1: "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven."

So says Philippians 2, that "Christ, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name."

"My name shall be there."

And so says Hebrews 4: "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly

to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Jesus is our Immanuel – God with us.

Jesus is our Holy of Holies – the focal point of our prayers.

Jesus is our high priest – the one through whom our prayers are offered and perfected.

All our anchors of faith, our physical and tangible objects and places, our rituals and practices, they all point us to this truth: Jesus is our guarantee that God has not abandoned his people, but listens, ear bent low to our mumbling mouths, and hears us when we cry.

And while it's true that we are reminded of this by our liturgy and worship acts, what most reminds us of the presence of God in our lives is the presence of one another. Because we, filled with Christ's spirit, are his hands and feet in the world. We are his image bearers, called to testify, through our words and deeds, to the never ceasing love and presence of God.

One of my seminary professors said that the pastor's job is to bear the presence of a faithful God into any situation. I would argue this is also the calling of *all* God's people. We are called to show up.

To be present.

To come alongside one another when life gets difficult.

To sit at the table with each other when we agree and when we disagree.

To weep with those who weep and to laugh with those who are rejoicing.

To pray for one another and with one another.

Because Jesus has promised that where two or three are gathered in his name, he will be in the midst of them. When we stay with one another, when we love one another, we bear witness to a God who stays with us in love.

There's going to be a lot of life happening in our church over the next few months. Some of it will be really good. There will be baptisms, and professions of faith, and art projects, and choir, and Sunday School and after-church-coffee and candlelight services.

Some of it will be harder. There will be congregational meetings and council meetings and parking-lot-discussions and hard questions and big decisions. There will be anxiety in this place. Probably some fear. It may not always seem like God is here, like God is yet holding us.

So my prayer for us is that we will continue to bear the presence of a faithful God into all of these situations through our own presence, and our own prayers.

That we will sit with one another and so remind each other that our God came down to be with us.

That we will love one another, even when it's hard, and so remind each other that God loved us when we deserved no love.

And that if we do nothing else, we will continue to pray together, asking God to be with us, to shine the light of his face upon us, and to give us his peace.

So would you pray with me now?

O God,
Will you be here?
Will you be present to us,
in our joys and in our sorrows?
This is what you have promised,
and so we beg you to keep your word.
Show up in our midst
and reassure us of your presence and your faithfulness.
And help us be the signposts that point people to that faithfulness.
Help us live with one another
and bear with one another
and love one another,
so that through our lives others might come to know
your goodness and your grace.
Hold us, O God, and hear our prayer.
We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ,
the author and perfecter of our prayers,
Amen.