

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43

Psalm 84

Where does God live? It sounds like a fairly simple and straightforward question with an obvious answer. But what if a child asked it, instead of a preacher? What would you say then? If you say everywhere, you've got to know the next question is going to be something like, how do you know that? Show me. What does God look like? I can't see God... Are you sure? And it all depends on the child and the situation, and maybe even which way the wind is blowing, which direction the conversation goes from there. Where can I go to find God? How can I know for sure God is with me? What about when I'm scared or mad or hungry or just need someone to talk to? Then how can I know for sure where God lives, so I can march up and knock on the door and say what I need to say, get what I need to get?

I suspect the reasoning was different, but I also suspect it was some form of very concrete thinking on the part of the earliest Hebrew people that led them to the creation of the Ark of the Covenant. They were wandering in the wilderness, trying to find their way from Egypt to the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey, wherever, whatever that was. They believed God was with them, that God was leading them, that this whole blasted journey was God's idea – but after a while, it got hard to hold on with the same confidence that had seemed relatively easy at first. They got hungry. They got thirsty. They got homesick. They got scared that they were going to get lost in the wilderness, stuck in the wilderness, abandoned in the wilderness forever. And some days they just weren't so sure where to go to find God, because quite honestly, there hadn't been any sightings, rustlings, stirrings or signs of activity for quite some time. And so they built the Ark of the Covenant. The details of it are spelled out in the book of Exodus, and the people carried it with them wherever they went, believing that God dwelled in the Ark. They carried it at the head of the caravan, and that way they knew where to look, where to go when they needed something. Once they built the Ark, they had in their hands a reassurance that God was with them, and that helped boost their confidence that just maybe, one day, they would arrive at a place they could call home, settle down, and trade in their walking shoes for a pair of bedroom slippers they could tuck under the edge of the bed.

They finally got to that Promised Land, and they built their houses and established their country, and planted their crops, and put down roots and put out the welcome mat and put up street signs. And as they did all of that, it just didn't feel right to any of them that God was still living in the Ark of the Covenant. As they were stretching their arms and settling in, it seemed important to also make a place for God to live, a home more proper and established and permanent than the box they'd used on the road. King David had begun some designs for a temple that would house God, but was told fairly quickly that God wasn't ready to be housed, and that God was going to

build a house for David rather than the other way around. And it was actually quite a bit later, after David had died and his son Solomon had taken over as king, that the blue prints were dug out and dusted off and finished up. Once they got underway with construction, it took them 7 years to build the temple, but finally it was done. The people had built a fitting home for God, a place they could go to worship, to honor God, to pay their respects and teach their children.

This morning's lesson from 1Kings comes from the service of dedication for the new temple, and is the prayer that King Solomon voiced as he stood before the altar. And the thing that's most striking to me is that the prayer really isn't much about the temple at all. After years of longing, wandering, planning and constructing, when it came time to dedicate the temple, Solomon didn't talk about the temple nearly as much as he talked about God. "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart..." Then he went on to talk about his father David, and God's promise to keep David's heirs on the throne, and he asked God to continue to keep that promise. And then with a kind of honesty and humility that I don't expect from a king, especially one who's built a temple 60 cubits by 20 cubits by 30 cubits and then overlaid it with gold, Solomon acknowledged the presumptuousness of thinking God would dwell on the earth. "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" God has said, "My name shall be there" – which is no small thing. A name was considered the very essence of a person, and God's name was seen as too holy to be spoken and too mysterious to be understood, and yet also wondrously, graciously, integrally linked with the people of Israel throughout history. God's name will be there and God's promise and presence and blessing – but God will not be contained or limited or domesticated by this temple or any other human contraption.

And somehow in all of that, I think that Solomon is acknowledging that the temple isn't really and in truth never will be the place where God lives. God is much too big and too active to be contained by any building; God is out and about, moving and working among the people. Much more than the temple whose construction he has just overseen, on the day of its dedication, Solomon is focused on the covenant between God and the people of Israel, on the quality of the relationship between the people and God. The temple is a tool and a resource, but it's neither the point nor the priority.

I was really drawn to a story I read this week about church, and the ways in which it can either be a hindrance and an obstacle or a moveable feast that welcomes in and offers blessing.

In Rio a group of Christians was working with street children, of whom there are twenty-five million in Brazil. Every day boys from the street got together at one spot to chat, to discuss their problems and to share their fears and anger with one another. Many came regularly. The church people consisted of a Catholic priest, a Methodist, a priest from the Umbanda cult, a Presbyterian and a young Lutheran pastor.

One day one of the boys said, 'I would like to be baptized.'

'In which church, then?' asked the Catholic.

'Which church? In ours here, of course.'

'But to which church building would you like to go?'

'Building? No, to our church, here on the street. I want to be baptized here among us.'

The Methodist said he couldn't issue a certificate. The Catholic thought it wouldn't be possible to perform jointly with the man from the Umbanda religion. The boy stuck by his wish. Finally the pastor organized the necessary things: he laid a board over two crates and filled an old boot with water for flowers, which the children provided. The Catholic brought along a candle. The baptism took place in the street, in the name of Jesus Christ. (Dorothee Soelle, *Resources for Preaching and Worship, Year B*, page 206)

Where does God live? In the street as well as in the temple. Wherever the people gather, wherever the people dwell in God's presence and live in God's love. In heaven as well as on earth and throughout all the earth. I meet God here in this building, in the windows and the wood and the simple beauty of the structure. I'm reminded of God's covenant every time I watch the rainbow move about the carpet and the pews and along the side of a child's head. I see God on the streets and in places where compassion touches pain and need. And I met God this summer at the Hermit Lake shelter at the base of the headwall of Tuckerman Ravine. For me it's one of the holiest places there is. I go there and face this towering rock wall that feels like a fortress to protect me. The water falls down over the face of the ravine and a brook tumbles near by and the water becomes a kind of white noise that blocks out all distraction. The wind blows gently and refreshingly. The whole setting feels like a cradle where I'm held and nurtured and offered rest by the loving, gentle grace of God.

Where does God live? In the mountains and on the street as well as in the temple. Wherever the people gather, wherever the people dwell in God's presence and live in God's love. In heaven as well as on earth and throughout all the earth.

Amen.