

Church of the Crossroads
Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 27, 2006
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GOD OF THE TENT AND GOD OF THE TEMPLE

1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43

Psalm 84

Luke 9:57-62

Under King David, who reigned from the year 1000 to the year 961 B.C.E., the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were united into a United Monarchy. David's successor, Solomon, reigned as King of the United Monarchy from 981 until 922 B.C.E. Among the greatest achievements of Solomon's reign was the construction of the Jerusalem temple. This morning's reading from 1 Kings describes the dedication of the newly constructed temple.

The temple served the monarchy well. Yahweh, the Sovereign King of heaven and earth, was now housed in a temple that could be frequented often by the kings of Israel. And when I say that God was housed in the temple, that is exactly how it was understood. God now had a residence, a dwelling place for God's name, to which not only the Kings of Israel could come to worship but also the people of Israel and foreigners as well. God was now located in a sacred place.

Prior to the construction of the temple, God's presence was most especially felt in and around the tent that housed the Ark of the Covenant wherein rested the stones upon which were written the 10 Commandments. From the days of the wilderness wanderings, the forty years between the time of the Exile and the entrance into Palestine, the tent and the Ark of the Covenant had moved with the people from place to place. Those days were no more. God's dwelling place, once on the move, had become permanent and established. The removal of the Ark of the Covenant from its location in the tent and its placement in the temple was accompanied by great ceremony and prayer. Solomon prays that God will regard the temple with special favor as a dwelling place for God's name, and will heed the prayers of all who pray toward this sacred place.

With the establishment of the temple, however, something was lost in Israel's spiritual understanding. In the wilderness journey, the people had learned the difficult lesson of what it means to trust in God's leading. In the wilderness, the people had nothing to rely upon apart from God's grace and mercy. When there was no bread, God sent them manna. When there was no meat, God sent them quail. They had come to know the grace of dependency. They had come to know that God was on the move with them, that God was with them to protect them and supply their every need. God was the God of the tent which was taken down each morning and journeyed with the people. God was a God on the move, deeply involved in the life and struggles of the people.

The temple changed that understanding. In spite of Solomon's declaration that God's dwelling place was in the heavens, Israel soon regarded the temple as the dwelling place of God on earth. Israel could now depend on a sacred place for prayer and ritual and order and safety. The hard life experiences of the wilderness that had nurtured a trust in God's leading and the grace of dependency were soon forgotten. Everything became established and ordered.

The God of the tent and the God of the temple – there is a dialectic between the two. That is, there needs to be a continuing dialogue between the two, the God of the tent and the God of the temple. Humanly speaking, we surely have a need for sacred places. We desire a sacred place to come to, a place of beauty and safety, a place for the community to gather, a place for the renewal of hope and courage, a place where we can be ourselves in the presence of God, a place where we can experience the holy in a unique and special way. In the words of the 84th psalm,

How lovely is your dwelling place, O God of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of God;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your
praise.
Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are
the highways to Zion.

- Psalm 84:1 2, 4, 5

For us, that place is this place, Church of the Crossroads. One of the privileges of my own life is to have the opportunity to come here most days of the week. As soon as I approach this place, I find myself giving thanks not only for its restful beauty, but for all that it represents – our community and the leading of God in our lives. Truly, there is a need for such sacred places in our lives, places that provide order and safety in the midst of a world filled with chaos and uncertainty and peril.

Yet, there is a danger when we attach so much meaning to a sacred place. The danger is that we will forget that God is also present in the world, that very world that we often experience as chaotic and uncertain. It is in that very world that we also experience God, that we come to rely on God's grace, for grace is given most especially in the midst of struggle and uncertainty, and it is God's grace that carries us through the rough places of our life experience.

I may be wrong, but I have a suspicion that established religion will always become attached to buildings and places of worship. I think of Westminster Cathedral in London or St. Paul's Cathedral, imposing places that spoke clearly of the authority of the Anglican Church, in the days before it was culturally, if not legally, disestablished. I think also of the Washington Cathedral where the nation gathers to mourn presidents and commemorate disasters and tragedies in our national life. The Washington Cathedral symbolizes established religion, not in a legal sense, as in Great Britain, but in a cultural sense.

But what of the God of the tent, the God on the move, the God whose presence permeates all of life, the God whose grace abounds everywhere? That is the God whose presence is felt not only in great cathedrals but in the humblest of city streets and homes. The problem always with established religion is that it tends to limit our experience of God to sacred buildings and places. Then we have difficulty relating our experience of God to everyday life. We come to the church building to get spiritually energized for the other days of the week. Yet, the truth is that God is very much present with us, not only on Sundays, but each and every day of our lives.

You may recall that the United Monarchy fell shortly after the death of Solomon. The Biblical historians, as they related the history of the monarchy's collapse kept pointing to the sin of forgetfulness. The people of Israel and the kings of Israel had forgotten the wilderness experience of their

ancestors and what it means to depend upon God's grace and leading. The God of the temple had crowded out the God of the tent.

The temple itself was destroyed in the sixth century B.C.E. when the Babylonians defeated Israel. It was rebuilt after the exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, only to be destroyed again in the year 70, some thirty-five years after the life of Jesus.

We know that Jesus himself found himself in conflict with the temple establishment, and the system of sacrifice which he considered harmful because, in the words of the prophet Micah, it diverted attention from the need to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. I like to think that Jesus was doing his very best to remind his fellow Jews that it is not only in the temple that God is to be found; God is also to be found on the road, to speak. God is to be found wherever love is lived and justice is served and peace is made. He himself had no place to lay his head:

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father. But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

- Luke 9:57-61

God is a God of the tent. God is on the move, and so are those who have decided to follow Jesus. God is to be discovered in the journey, in the cost and joy of daily discipleship.

And yet, we also cherish the God of the temple. The God of the tent and the God of the temple. There is a dialectic between the two. It is not either/or but both/and. Perhaps we need to change our thinking, just a little. Instead of seeing the church as just a place where we can be spiritually energized on Sunday for the other days of the week, perhaps on each and every Sunday, we need also to bring to our worship in this sacred place all of

our experiences of God's presence in our daily lives and, with our brothers and sisters, give thanks to God for that grace that sustains us and gives us hope day by day.

My friends, let us keep in our imaginations both the God of the tent and the God of the temple. Let us remember always that God's presence is to found in all times and places. God is in all things, and all things are in God. Whether we are in the temple or on the road, we are sustained by God's presence and grace. We are granted hope and courage for all the days of our lives. Thanks be to God.