

# *How Lovely Is Your Dwelling Place*

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Psalm 84; 1 Kings 8:1-13  
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church  
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As we gather for worship this morning, in the midst of the different challenges in our world, we are given two Bible passages – one from Psalm 84 and one from 1 Kings 8 – that bring us into the orbit of the Jerusalem Temple. Bible passages about the temple may seem remote from our contemporary challenges, but we will see that they lead us into the heart of the church's response to the world.

1 Kings 8 tells the story of the dedication of the temple by King Solomon, whose energy and initiative were responsible for building the temple. Psalm 84 is a rapturous reflection on the beauty of the temple, the 'dwelling place' of the Lord, where even humble birds, like the sparrow and the swallow, feel welcome and have a home. Now a focus on the temple may seem odd to us, especially if we have grown up in Sunday school singing the old song that 'the church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people.' Many of us have become deeply sensitized to the ways that church buildings can become ends in themselves, and it has become common to be driving through a town in Western Europe or here in North America, and see large church buildings, built in an earlier time, that are now homes to congregations much smaller than the building would suggest. The Church is best understood as a *movement* upon the earth, a community of God's people who embody and share and bear witness to God's love in their neighborhoods and communities, activities which are not confined to what can be done inside a facility.

And yet, at the same time, we are also aware of the unique role that church buildings and sacred spaces can play in the life of faith. For some of us, this awareness became acute during the pandemic, when we were not able to gather here in our sanctuary. A number of people have spoken to me about how moving it was for them the first time they came into the sanctuary after being away for many months. And more than one person said, "No offense, Pastor Scott, but it wasn't your sermons that brought me to tears. There's just something about being in this space." Sacred space does something to us and for us and with us. When we enter through those doors at the rear of the sanctuary, we are crossing a threshold into another realm. There is a healing that occurs in sacred spaces. That's why they are such precious spaces. Sanctuaries and temples can become what Celtic Christianity refers to as 'thin places,' where the boundary between heaven and earth becomes almost transparent, where there is a particular energy and vitality that can be encountered there.

But of course, it is not the spaces themselves that are the source of this energy and vitality. The energy and vitality and healing are not simply at our disposal to control and distribute. More than one religious leader – perhaps even including King Solomon himself – has tried to ascribe and arrogate to themselves the power of a sanctuary, which is very similar to playing around with a downed electrical wire. It rarely ends well for the religious leader who does so. There's just too much at stake.

The reason that sacred spaces convey such healing energy and vitality is because of the presence of God. And again, we must very quickly say that God is never contained in sacred spaces like a church sanctuary. Especially when people try to use the God of the temple sanctuary to accomplish their own purposes and agendas, God will quite quickly move apart from the sanctuary. But the Bible bears witness that God is willing to be encountered in the temple or in a sanctuary, so the sacred spaces become places of anticipation, expectation, and hope for a reliable encounter with the living God.

When we are drawn into the orbit of the temple or the sanctuary, we are being drawn towards the *presence of God*. The Bible speaks of the presence of God using the language of clouds and smoke. So when Peter, James, and John go up on the mount of Transfiguration with Jesus, a '*cloud* overshadowed them' and a voice came from the cloud (Mark 9:7) When the Lord led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, the Lord went before them in 'a pillar of *cloud* by day...and a pillar of *fire* by night' (Exodus 13.21). And when the priests came out of the holy place, in our text from 1 Kings 8, 'a *cloud* filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled' the temple (1 Kings 8:10-11).

This language invites us to understand that we, like our ancestors of faith before us, may encounter the mysterious, but very real, presence of the living God. God cannot be touched, but God wants to be known by us, God wants to be in a living relationship with us. God does not only want us to read books about God, or to think thoughts about God, or to have arguments about God. God wants us to *know God personally*, to encounter God in our own daily lives.

That's what Solomon's temple was ultimately about. It was not about the gold, or the cedar, or the lofty roof. It was about being a place where the people of Israel could reliably encounter the presence of God.

As I think of Lewinsville Presbyterian and its calling at this time and in this place, it seems to me that bearing witness to the presence of God in people's lives is the most important thing that we can do. The holy and gracious presence of God is the source and the ground of everything else that we do, and it will *energize* and *motivate* and *correct* and *serve as the foundation* of everything else that we do.

There are at least three reasons why the church needs to bear witness to the presence of God. One is that the presence of God in people's lives is a profound and complete antidote to the massive loneliness and isolation that people are experiencing today. We've talked about this before, how, even before the pandemic, people are more isolated from each other, they may have 3000 friends on Facebook and 2000 followers on Instagram who know the carefully curated public image of them, but there may be very few people who actually know them as a real person, through and through. The church should be a place where people can get to know each other in depth, but the reality is that God *already* knows them completely. And if the church can help lead people to know the presence of God in their lives, it renders life less lonely in a transformative way.

Which brings us to the second reason. God's presence is a *healing* presence. Getting to know God personally brings about deep healing in your life. Just this past Friday, in the devotional book *Jesus Calling*, which Charlie Mendenhall has introduced to so many of us, Jesus tells the reader: "My very Presence has immense healing powers. You cannot live close to Me without experiencing some degree of healing...You receive the healing that flows naturally from My Presence, whether you seek it or not. But there is more – much more – available to those who ask."<sup>1</sup> God's healing, which is mysterious and cannot be controlled, is at work in people's lives in ways that we cannot understand and do not always perceive. In our broken, polarized, and violent society and world, God is present as the crucified Christ, restoring relationships and communities, healing minds and bodies and spirits, enlivening parts of us that have become withered.

But while the presence of God is an antidote to loneliness and is a source of deep healing, we must not simply reduce the presence of God to something that is *useful*. It is very easy for religion to become utilitarian, where we pursue a life of spirituality because of what we can get out of it, sort of like a spiritual version of going to the gym. And if we don't end up getting what we think we have been promised – whether it's a svelte body after a couple of weeks at the gym, or a life of utter serenity after going to church several times – we may mistakenly decide someone was over-selling the product.

Ultimately, God will not be used. The third reason why the church bears witness to the presence of God is simply because God's presence is beautiful and worthy of adoration. You can hear this in the psalmist's exultation: "How lovely is your dwelling place! My soul faints for the courts of the Lord, my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God." Ultimately, God's presence is not to be useful to us. God's presence is full of beauty that overwhelms us. As we grow closer to God's presence, God's radiance and majesty and holiness become overwhelming, to the point that we cannot find words to speak, and we may find ourselves weeping with joy and falling into a hushed silence of awe. Being present at the birth of a child, or at the moment when someone

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Young, *Jesus Calling* (Thomas Nelson Publishing: Nashville, 2011) 243.

dies, or at a sunrise on a mountaintop, begin to give you a sense of what the raw beauty of God's presence is like.

Friends, we in the church have the greatest privilege. During these challenging times, when loneliness and alienation and fear are taking such a toll on people, we have been introduced to the presence of the Holy One who will see us through. The Holy One accompanies us day by day and is present with us to guide us through our decisions. We must not keep the news about this Holy One to ourselves. We must find ways to introduce those in our community who are hungry for transcendence, who are lonely, who are wondering if there is a better way to live - we must find ways to introduce them to the presence of the living God. To God and to God alone, be all the glory, Amen.