



Temples

TEXT
2 Samuel 7:1–11
Ephesians 2:12–22

July 22, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Hallie Hottle

In the church I served down in Miami, Florida, I spent a lot of my week with our children. I was responsible for teaching theology class to the students of our church school. And I wasn't very good at it. I had taught kids before, but formal classroom teaching is much different. "Classroom management" was not a skill seminary had imparted.

God bless the teachers of our children.

My more-brilliant colleagues taught me as I went. But I also discovered a trick of my own. I'm not proud of it, but I learned that if I would take my students out of my classroom and walk them down into the sanctuary, magical things would happen. They were quieter. They walked straighter. They listened fully. Their little eyes stayed wide as they gazed around the tall ceilings and stained-glass windows.

It was the second grade class that finally asked me one day what I suspected they were wondering, "Does God live here?" It's a good question. We talk about the church as being God's house. And it is ... and it's not. The church building is for God. But it does not contain God. I think we know that. But

the question of where God is, is something we've wrestled with since the time of David.

When we meet King David today, he's at home, resting. And as he rests, he wonders: "I'm living here in a house, but God is out in a tent. Shouldn't God be in a house too?" It seems like a reasonable question.

Ever since the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, God traveled with them through the Ark of the Covenant. It's a small wooden box, thought to contain the tablets of the Ten Commandments. You didn't touch the box. God's presence was too powerful. So it was probably carried on a set of sticks, like a cart. It was mobile, so God could reside wherever these traveling people were. And whenever they stopped, a tent was built to shelter the box.

But the Israelites had come a long way since their wilderness days. They've made it to the Promised Land. They demanded a king. Now they are like the other nations. David has been recently anointed the second king over all the tribes of Israel, after the fall of King Saul. There has been war and victory. The capitol has been set at Jerusalem. The Ark of the Covenant has been recovered from enemies.

So now David rests, and wonders about where God will live in this new day. With a capitol and a king, with newfound national power and armies to defend borders, maybe they didn't need God to be so mobile. Where would God live in this new kingdom?

So David wants to build a house for God. And God is not amused. God asks, "Who are you, to build a house for me?"

Later, in Chronicles, we hear David talking to his son Solomon. He says he himself wasn't allowed to build the temple because "he was a warrior, and had shed too much blood." Hmm, perhaps. It's an impressive excuse. It's not clear in God's response why he tells David "no."

But a more honest reason might have to do with the story right before this. They were moving the Ark of the Covenant, and a man, Uzzah, reaches out and touches the ark. God strikes him dead right there. David sees this, and he is angry and afraid of the Lord. After this, it says, he "refused to take the ark into his care."

David wonders about a permanent place for God to reside. And I suspect David's wondering is a thoughtful one. And I suspect David's wondering is that

of a king, with a nation to grow and power to defend. He needs a place for God to live, a place to put God, contain God, for he has seen what happens when God is allowed to roam among the people.

It was while I was at that Miami church that I found myself part of an adventure, and began to understand this more completely.

One of our new, never before Presbyterian, originally from England and beautifully-accented members, had a dream. He wanted to ride his motorcycle from there in Miami to the Arctic Circle and back. He had always wanted to do this, but now, having joined this church, he had a reason. He wanted to stop at as many PCUSA churches as he could, with the desire to meet people and connect us to each other.

The idea escalated. He wore a tracker, and we managed his website from home, showing people where he was along the way. You could, for a price, invite him to stop and do strange-but-not-illegal things, and we gave away the funds to organizations in our community. As he met people, he asked what their dreams were, and our youth transcribed them onto ribbons that hung from our building.

So in 2013, in the midst of PCUSA churches all over this country splitting themselves down the middle — largely over whether God resided with gay people or strictly with non-gay people — there were 120 days and 15,000 miles where random strangers met a crazy

Presbyterian on a motorcycle, who reminded them that God loved them, and encouraged them to chase their dreams for good too.

I don't know what came of all the places and people he met during this adventure. We made no attempt to track the "outcomes" of dreams we collected. But there's a congregation in Miami that looks different now than it had before. We learned, in a dramatic, strange way, that God cannot be contained; that God dwells among the people, all the people, from Miami to the Arctic Circle and back.

It's an easier thing to build a building and stick God inside than to risk God putting you on a motorcycle and sending you to encounter the holy all over the place.

It was later, through David's son, King Solomon, that the first temple would be built. It would be built by forced labor. And it would be paid for through heavy taxation, funded by those without the privilege to enter its innermost parts.

Chambers were built in the temple, to keep the people separate. So the outside was for women, Gentiles, the poor and the dirty. Men could go a little farther, if they had enough money and were born in the right place. And only the priests could go inside — priests determined now by the king. And the temple flourished as the nation flourished, the two inextricably linked. And so when the nation toppled, the temple toppled, destroyed by war as the people were sent into exile.

Despite the falling, we kept rebuilding — building and building, prophesying about the building — until one day a new teacher entered. He saw the money-changers, the rule-keepers, the system created to keep some people out. And his anger raged as he tossed the tables and condemned the leaders.

That's the problem with temples. There are always walls involved — meant to divide; meant to keep separate. And the new teacher, he wasn't a fan of that. So on the day he was crucified, those walls crumbled. The temple curtains tore in half. God could not be contained. There would be no more boxes.

And from the start, the early church struggled with this. They wondered if the church could grow past Jerusalem. They worried about including Gentiles into the family. And over and over again, God's response was "yes." All of it is holy. All of it is temple. There are no lines to divide up what was God's and what was not.

The divine had become human. What was dead is alive. Walls no longer exist. And it was the people, all the people, who would be God's dwelling place — human temples, each and every one, woven together into the living body of Christ. That is so much harder than building a temple. And it poses great risk to those who want to control, contain, confine power for themselves.

The new way that Jesus created didn't just rid us of our temple buildings. The temple and the nation were dependent on one

another, linked to each other. The new way that Jesus created rid us of our temples and our dependence on kings and kingdoms. God could not be contained. And now, neither can the people.

So when much of our energy is consumed with talk of kings and capitol, of nation building and border defending, we'd do well to notice the temples growing around us. God cannot be contained. But kings will always try. They will build temples to put God somewhere, for the risk of faithful people seeing the holy in one another is too great.

When we recognize one another as dwelling places of God, Presbyterians leave meetings at last month's General Assembly to walk miles and present bail money to the poor, whom we've turned into prisoners. We don't wait for temple rules to change; we find the cracks in the walls and rip them down.

When we recognize the holy in each other, our lawyers spend extra hours training one another in immigration law, so our kings can't defend our terrorizing of tiny temples near our nation's borders, with excuses of not enough legal help.

When we recognize one another as temples of our God, we find ourselves in the center of our nation, in one of the largest churches in our denomination, as a rare example of not breaking ourselves in half in recent years. For we long ago recognized that the body of Christ is not the body without women, people of every race, our LGBTQ friends.

When we see God's dwelling place as one another, we don't

welcome divisive rhetoric as "strong" or excuse policy that lacks compassion. We see our division for what it is: the breaking of Christ's body. And when the people refuse to let one another be broken, when we refuse to follow the temple's rules, they cannot stand.

In ancient days, it was the prophets who pulled back on kings, who did strange things — the ancient equivalent of riding motorcycles in order to help the people see. I am hopeful in this day for the prophetic witness in our midst. And I am certain we could use more of it.

I tried to get my motorcycle-riding friend to take us on another trip. But he's been busy, graduating from seminary just last weekend. So in three weeks, we're going to engage in a witness of our own. We're going to confess that God doesn't live here. We're going to practice the truth that God dwells always and only with the people. We're going to knock down some temple walls that are attempting to keep us from our neighbors in this day.

On August 12, our Gathering service that typically worships at 5:00 p.m. here in Friendship Hall, is going to gather, with Session permission, in Wyandotte County, with our brothers and sisters at Grandview Park Presbyterian Church.

Grandview is a historic church, built in the 1890s, in what is now a mostly Latino community. Over the course of these past couple of years, our relationship with Grandview Park has grown, as they have taught us much of what it means

to live in the turmoil of immigration debates, as immigrants. They have put flesh and bone on otherwise hypothetical conversations, and have caused our hearts to burst and break with stories of living in a time when our kings have labeled them as less than holy. Our temple walls are more apparent when you love people on every side.

So our congregations have been caring for one another. Our Social Witness and Advocacy Task Force has been worshipping there, filling pews while the threat of ICE raiding our churches has grown. And recently, we've created a bail fund together, ensuring that people in our communities won't be held indefinitely as they await immigration hearings.

This relationship has helped us remember that God dwells in our midst, and we look more like the body of Christ when we're all together. So on August 12, we'll gather in their sanctuary to give witness to that. We'll worship together in English and in Spanish. We'll bless all our children as they head into another school year. We'll celebrate Communion, embodying our hope for Christ's promised day, strangers from different places, made one around Christ's table. We'll collect a special offering that will seed the renovation of Grandview's kitchen — a space that feeds 100 children every day. And we'll conclude worship with a Mexican feast all together.

We're under no illusion that one night of transformed worship will transform our world. But it might change us and our

community, even a little bit. It might remind us of God's truth, that God dwells always and only among the people — and might strengthen us to keep resisting our other temple options and cling to one another.

King David wondered, "Where will God reside in this new kingdom?" Let's not keep asking the same. God has told us. And when we didn't listen, God showed us, breaking so our temples might be forever broken. We'll practice some of what this means in a couple of weeks in worship. I hope you're there. But we're called to practice it, each of us, every day, in our encounters with each other in this world.

So do that. Live as if you believe God dwells everywhere, with everyone, especially when it is hard. For it's when the faithful refuse the king's temples that God cannot be contained.

Let us pray: Holy God, make us to see you in one another. Make us to resist any powers that tell us it is not so. Weave us together, more tightly than you have before, as the body your world needs in this day. Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.