

## God's House- A Building or You and Me?

II Samuel 7: 1-14a    Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56    Ephesians 2: 19-22

Home is one of the basic human experiences and what one scholar has called the base by which we all live our lives. When we attempt to think about God's house or home, we are naturally confused, for- unlike us finite humans- we know that God does not occupy a physical place or a space. We know that God is beyond space and locale but yet, some how we seem more comfortable if we can strictly identify God's house.

The story is told of a pastor in an inner-city congregation that started an after- school program for the children of the neighborhood, most of whom were not involved with the church otherwise. One afternoon a young man about four years old entered the church with an expression of awe all over his face. Wide-eyed he looked up at the pastor and asked, "Are you God?" Taken aback by the question, the pastor managed to say that they were God's helpers. The little boy then wanted to know where God was. His mother had told him that the church building was God's house, and he had come expecting to meet God.

Where is God's house? Certainly not confined to a building even though- without clearly thinking about it- we consider this building to be God's house and thus teach our children to believe that. The Bible speaks often of where God dwells. The church through the centuries has made some kind of claim of being God's dwelling place, but today that assumption is often challenged. We hear about God's home within us, in our hearts, and within our spirits. Or God abides in the natural world, the beauty of the mountains and forests and the quiet of the mountain stream or sometimes the golf course on Sunday mornings.

The lectionary lessons for this morning all ask us to consider the question of where God lives. Our Call to Worship scripture from Ephesians 2 reminds us that "we are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." The Old Testament lesson of II Samuel 7 is an account of King David's attempt to build a physical building for God. The portions of Mark 6 give us an account of the importance of the work of God's house through the actions of Jesus on teaching and healing.

There are so many important and "food for thought" gems in these three scriptures. Many sermons could be written on each. However, I hope through looking briefly at each, we can find common, and helpful threads.

Last week we discussed David's rise to power and his attempts to make Jerusalem the political capital. By bringing the ark of God to Jerusalem, it would also be the religious capital of the nation. The II Samuel 7 scripture this morning relates how David began to feel some pangs of guilt over the fact that he was residing in a fine house of cedar while God continued to be housed in a tent. We find David consulting the prophet, Nathan, who at first gives David the go ahead. However, overnight God comes to Nathan and sends him back to David        -1-

with orders to NOT build a physical house for God- that one of David's descendants would do that. This indeed comes true when Solomon, David's son, builds the temple.

God wants no physical temple, but has instead other plans for David- greatness, peaceful living for the nation with rest from hostilities with others. DAVID WANTS TO BUILD GOD A HOUSE, BUT GOD WILL MAKE DAVID HIMSELF A HOUSE. David will become a dynasty and his offspring will establish a kingdom and build God's physical house. The establishment of the Davidic dynasty out of which will come all Israel's kings and eventually the Messiah. Practically speaking, this promise assured Israel stability in its government. Theologically speaking, the promise assures us that God's house in the world is through and with people, who serve God faithfully.

The Ephesians reading picks up the theological issue of God being at home in the world through and with people. These words- used as our Call to Worship- first of all reminds us to remember our past before our faith understanding- that of being strangers and aliens. Then it notes the current state- that of being built upon a foundation with Christ Jesus as a cornerstone- the critical support block.

It then turns to the results of this transformation- the creation of a new and single humanity and the building of a community of faith- a dwelling place for God.

What a startling and humbling idea! In community as the church, we Christians have become a house for God in this world! This is to say that together, as a community- individuals taken up into a group- we are where God chooses to make a divine home. Nor is the community to be simply equated with the institutional church. Most important is that the interrelationship of Christians in their faith and with the Holy Spirit in our midst comprises the presence of God. That is sometimes hard to believe, given our squabbles and quarrels, and all our weaknesses; but it is the promise God offers to us. However, God's promise that the community of faith is the dwelling place of the divine also comprises a challenge, for it defines the church's mission with the utmost clarity.

The portions of Mark 6 define what it is the church does as a result of being God's dwelling place. It seems obvious that those who developed the lectionary patched together the two short passages from Mark 6- verses 30-34 and 53-56 with the intent to focus on Christ's compassion for the needy and how that compassion is expressed in specific actions. By constructing the reading in this way, the Gospel invites us to think of the teachings and healings as expressions of Jesus compassion.

The Gospel lesson from Mark 6 begins with the disciples reporting to Jesus on their work as missionaries- remember Jesus sent them out two by two into the countryside and empowered them to heal the sick and preach the Good News. They return to tell Jesus what they have done, but they are exhausted by all the people. Jesus pulls them away for a bit of

rest and relaxation, only to find that the crowd gets to their retreat place before they did. Even though Jesus and his followers are experiencing great popularity- contrary to his hometown experience- Jesus does not bask in the popularity. Instead, Jesus sees the crowd as needy and lost- like sheep without a shepherd. We get the sense that their need in verses 30-34 is not a physical one or Jesus would have healed and fed them. Rather Jesus senses a spiritual and intellectual need and begins teaching them. We read that when Jesus saw the great crowd, he had compassion on them- deep, emotional concern. Jesus is profoundly moved by the needy crowd.

The remaining verses of our Mark 6 Scripture recounts a second landing in the village of Gennesaret where people came from all around, bringing their sick to Jesus for healing. They were anxious to simply touch his cloak and we read that even then they were healed.

Where does God dwell? According to these passages from Mark, God is found with the lost and confused as well as with the ill and infirm. God identifies with those who are suffering. If Jesus reveals the heart of God, then God is found where that deep compassion for the needy and hurting is felt and acted upon. God's dwelling place is not tucked away merely in some shrine set apart from the world but with humans who are desperate for healing, whether physical or spiritual. Yes, God's house is in the community of faith. However, God's presence is what leads us out of the sanctuary into the world to minister to the needy. The Ephesians and the II Samuel passages suggest that God dwells with the believers, and the Gospel lesson from Mark clarifies that God's presence is found in a believer's service. God is at home where the community of faith reaches beyond itself in mission. If the needs of the world are to be met, they will need not only physical healing but also a sharing of the Good News.

There is an old story about several women who were visiting an elderly friend who was sick. After a while, they rose to leave and told her, "We will keep you in our prayers." "Just wash the dishes in the kitchen," the ailing woman replied, "I can do my own praying!"

What do these Scriptures have to say to us this morning? If we are truly a part of the house of God, are there messages to consider?

This congregation holds awesome possibilities within its reach. For the past number of years and especially since Pastor Steve left, we have been considering who we are as a congregation- as God's people- and what that means in terms of our personal as well as collective involvement with each other and the world. What is it that we are called to do?

If you would, for a moment, imagine that you are a stranger coming into this church building on a Sunday morning. I would also encourage you to be conscious of this a second time when you come into the building again. As you walk through the front door, with a stranger's eyes, what do you see and feel?

Does it seem simply like a dark, well cared for building? Or would you have a clear sense that God's welcoming presence is felt from those who met you at the door or who were already here? I would be curious to know if you recognized God in the faces of the young people who met you at the door last week.

For a moment with eyes of a stranger, read through the bulletin, the monthly newsletter, the annual report. What is the focus of the congregation? Do you find an emphasis on members involved in various mission projects outside ourselves?

What is God's house for this congregation? Is being God's house dependent on leadership we designate as pastor? Are we primarily trying to maintain an institution OR building a spiritual house in which the Holy Spirit dwells in the midst of God's people? Are our activities determined by compassion for people who are "like sheep without a shepherd," or by a drive to continue to be the beautifully built and only church on St. Olaf Ave. in Canby, MN? Can we hold tight to the status quo and yet attempt to be God's hands and face to our community?

With David, God was not interested in a physical building, but the establishment of a people who would eventually share the greatness of their God with the world. Paul reminds us in Ephesians that we, "are members of the household of God...built upon the foundation, built together spiritually into the dwelling place for God." The Gospel of Mark lays before us Jesus' example of compassion- teaching, healing and caring.

A little boy was told that the church was the house of God. He went there Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. Finally, one Sunday, he asked, "When is God going to move in?" His question is one adults should take literally. I wonder how he would know that God is in that physical house. The answer to that seems to come straight from God!

Is God's house a building? I think our Scriptures have clearly said- no way! God's house IS you and me- individually but especially collectively! Is it obvious to a young child and to others that God is present among us? Is God's house in this place strong and secure or does it need a fair amount of renewal? Amen

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