

Meeting the Holy
1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43

“Will God indeed dwell on the earth?” asks Solomon, son of David, great King of Israel and builder of the Temple – the sacred dwelling place of God’s name, Yahweh.

This Temple that Solomon is dedicating in today’s reading would eventually become the center of Israel’s worship and sacrifice, a pilgrimage destination for Holy Days and special petitioning prayers. It was the home of the Ark of the Covenant, which itself was a portable symbol of God’s power and presence, the fabled resting place for the stone tablets containing the 10 commandments.

Unlike the Ark, Solomon’s Temple was not portable – in all its architectural splendor and solidity, it was a place-marker in dedication to God and a reminder that God could be met in this place. In the midst of the Promised Land, where the people lived and gave thanks for bounty or prayed for relief, here dwells God’s holy name, on which you may call and be heard, wherever you are. God is accessible here.

And yet, even in his assertion that Yahweh is among them and the name of God will be heard and called upon throughout the world, Solomon wonders: “Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!”

Such a question as Solomon poses continues to capture our thoughts, and seekers continue to challenge ourselves with the answer.

This question of God’s knowable presence on the earth was the focus of study for my 2 weeks of continuing education at Ring Lake Ranch in Dubois, WY this month.

Surrounded by mountains etched with fossils of a prehistoric ocean;
lakes like a miracle resting in the arms of arid terrain;
wildlife cautioning the passing people that these paths remain their territory;
and ancient petroglyphs chipped into boulders by shamans and spiritual seekers –
in this awe-inspiring setting our study group contended with the question of Sacred Ground, Holy Places...
does God indeed dwell on the earth for us to encounter and know?

If God cannot be confined even by Solomon’s understanding of the “highest heaven” – which he repeatedly names as God’s dwelling place – if God cannot be contained within all of creation, then how may even a portion of God, even God’s *name*, dwell within Solomon’s Temple, *a material place*?

Is the place sacred?

Was it *made* sacred, as the final words of this morning’s reading infer, by the invoking of the Holy Name?

Did it need to be sanctified? Made sacred?

Or was that particular place always sacred?

Some Jewish traditions developed a complex mythology of the Temple site, making the very location of ultimate importance:

it is the place where the waters of the “Deep” were blocked off on the first day of creation;

it is the spot from which the dust was gathered to create Adam;

the Flood was caused by lifting the Temple’s Foundation Stone and releasing the waters of the Deep;

the Temple site was where Abraham prepared an altar to sacrifice Isaac, on and on continue the stories centered on this one, holy place.¹

As my study group asked ourselves and one another,

are there places that are inherently holy, or do humans name them so?

or perhaps there must there be a special encounter, a relationship between the person coming into contact with the place

and God revealing God's self in the moment?

Was the earth around Moses' burning bush holy ground always? Or was it Moses' meeting with God there that made it so?

How do people like you and I experience a sacred place or stand on holy ground? Is God indeed dwelling on the earth?

Though we studied and combined our collective wisdom of about 20 people, 2 weeks weren't enough for our group to agree on any answers.

We couldn't even agree on terminology!

Is there a difference between the word *sacred* and the word *holy*?

Some interpreted sacred as less powerful than holy because the word sacred has been used for some secular meanings.

Perhaps you have heard the American flag referred to as a sacred symbol?

It's not a *holy* object, but to some people it is *sacred*, not to be disrespected. Is that an accurate use of the word sacred?

Others in our group disagreed that the words were so different, and so we used them interchangeably.

Either way, how do we understand sacred place or holy ground? Do we recognize the site of Solomon's Temple as one or the other...or neither?

You may have a number of places in your life that have been special to you. What is it about those places that make them stand out?

The people you were with and the bonds you created there?

A sense of peace that enveloped you?

Is it utterly unnamable exactly what made the place so moving?

...Is there a difference between a *special* place and a *sacred* place?

Is Lourdes, France, for example, a holy place because a 14 year old girl encountered visions of the Virgin Mary there in 1858?

Or because people who were sick have been cured after pilgrimage there?

Or because people believe it is so?

Is Ring Lake Ranch a holy place because a millennium ago a people encountered Spirit and created pictorial reminders in stone?

Or because a couple hundred years ago the Shoshone Indians took spirit journeys on that land?

Or because 2 weeks ago I let myself be renewed by the Holy Spirit in that place?

Is Israel the Holy Land because God promised it to Abraham's descendents,

or because it is the birthplace of various religions,

or because Jesus who we know as Christ walked the earth there?

Is it *Holy Land*?

Or is it a land that many people of many faiths cherish because of our histories there? (Like the house you grew up in but which is no longer home?)

As I ask these questions for which – I’m sorry – I have no answers, I can’t help but think of the quite distinct views held between the 20 or so participants of my study group. We had conflict – good conflict, of the conversational type – but still conflict.

And if there were so many diverse understandings within that group as to
 what is holy and what is sacred and
 how do you *know* that
 and is God really able to be encountered there...
 ...then how many more distinct views may be between us, within this room?

And if there are more understandings in this place about *Holy Land*,
 the cherished places of God’s earth,
 then how many *more* views would exist between the people’s of the world?

If no one thought of the Holy Land as holy, would we still fight over it so fiercely? What a paradox.

“Will God indeed dwell on the earth?” asked Solomon.

The Christian tradition has a very clear answer to that question.
 We understand Emmanuel, God With Us,
 to have dwelled among us on the earth in the person of Jesus.
 And through the resurrection and the presence of the Holy Spirit,
 we continue to have Christ with us.

But how will we encounter him?

By praying to the site of the Temple where God’s Name always dwells?
 That’s probably not most of our styles, but it works for some.

 Would you meet God in the beauty of Ring Lake Ranch, as I did? Maybe, maybe not.

 Even this morning, some of you will name your time in this church as an encounter with the Holy,
 and others of you will come upon your sense of the sacred beyond these walls.

But we must be open to the meeting in order to experience it;
 to encounter God, we must allow God to encounter us.

So when we, as Solomon, ask the question “will God indeed dwell on the earth?” we may answer, “Indeed: but how will I encounter the God who dwells among us today?”

May we be open. Amen.

¹ Handout from Gene Tucker – do not know source.