

Will God Dwell on Earth?, August 22, 2021, St. Timothy, Burnaby
Psalm 84; 1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43; John 6:56-69

“But will God indeed dwell on the earth?”

Prayer

Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Our story of David has ended—we’ve moved on to his son (one of his sons): Solomon. And Solomon has succeeded in one area where David fell short: he completed a temple built to and for the God of Israel. David succeeded in making Jerusalem the one place where the physical presence of God dwelt—Solomon made that one place a beautiful and mighty temple, as opposed to a tent.

But now that that temple is built—now that Solomon has successfully created this architectural marvel, *will God indeed dwell on the earth?* Will it make any difference at all? Solomon realizes that “even heaven and highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house”. God is not *contained* in Solomon’s temple. That should come as no surprise. But how might things change for us if we could approach God in that way? If we believed that there was one place in all the world that we might go where God had set God’s presence, that if we went there, no matter our beliefs or our culture or our background—if we went to that one place in all the world we could be *assured* that God would hear our prayer? Would that change things for you? Would you pray differently? Would you make the effort to travel to this *one* place? If so, what would you pray when you got there?

If you’re like me, you have a few responses to this idea. First of all, it sounds a little fishy. A little suspect. Just *who* is *guaranteeing* that God is going to pay special attention to the prayers from this *one* place, anyway? What’s in it for the people running the church? Is there some kind of commission or fee structure? And also, *where* is this place? Why does it have to be so far away? But the point that I would always come back to is “why is God’s presence restricted to this *one* place? I thought God was everywhere. And I thought *the church* was God’s house (meaning *every* church). And what about our *bodies* being temples to the Holy Spirit?”

These are all very real questions. Very valid questions. But I can’t help wondering, if there *was* a place somewhere, in Jerusalem, probably, where it was understood that God was *present* and God would certainly hear our prayers...would that be appealing? And what does that say about the *other* places that God is supposed to dwell? In our local church, here at St. Timothy? Or, *in our hearts!* Have we been devaluing *those* places all along? Have I been praying in a way that I really believe that God will hear me? That I can be *assured* that God hears those prayers and will respond?

Does God listen? Does God interact with us (and our prayers) at all? Will God indeed dwell on the earth?

Because maybe it’s all for nothing. The magic talisman idea is so appealing—that you just have to follow the right formula and do the right thing in the right place and your wish will magically appear. If you really want something you have to speak to God in the temple—and on the way in you have to have bathed in the right way and wear the right clothes and behave the right way...and your wish will be granted. “Just bring me the broomstick of the witch of the west and your wish will be granted.” And those of us who are already skeptical have more reason to be suspicious, *especially* when prayers *aren’t* immediately granted, and especially when it seems like the prayers of those who are most righteous or holy or upright go unheeded.

Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Can God be pinned down? Is there anything we can be assured about?

The short answer is: “no”. God will not be pinned down. God will *not* dwell on the earth—at least, not exclusively. There is no magic formula that works for God—nothing we can do to *control* God and assure ourselves that our prayers will be answered. That we will gain power *over* God by mastering the requirements and ensuring the outcome of our desires.

God is not a magic genie. Our lives would be much simpler if that were the case.

But we don’t get to know all the answers. We are not privy to the magic formulas that make everything work out the way we want.

And what is perhaps most frustrating is that we won’t even fully *understand how* or *why* things work out the way that they do in this life. There will always be unsolved mysteries—and we all have to learn to be okay with that.

And that’s the point that Jesus is trying to drive home in today’s gospel reading. Jesus has been going on for quite some time—the past several weeks’ worth of gospel readings—about bread and flesh and coming down from heaven. And it is only when we get to the end of this chapter that Jesus really gets blunt about it. Those who follow Jesus eat his flesh and drink his blood. There is no room for metaphor here. “My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.” He makes it clear that he is *not* speaking metaphorically. Although...I don’t know what else he could possibly be saying. When we try to consider, even for a moment, that he was being *literal* here...there just wasn’t that much of him to go around. He wasn’t that large of a man, and even if people only took miniscule portions of his physical flesh...we would have run out of Jesus a long time ago.

In the world of the Church we have found ways of explaining this. A long time ago, even. We know (or claim to know) exactly what Jesus is talking about. When we’ve grown up in the church Jesus’ deliberately provocative language is tamed—straightforward even. Gone from it is the original sense of offensiveness—of taboo and horror. Today Jesus’ words are...simple.

But they are not supposed to be. They were *never* supposed to be. There are *meant* to be offensive. Confusing. Off-putting. Abhorrent.

I have to confess that I don’t understand them. Not really. I don’t really get what Jesus is on about.

But I don’t have to. It’s not necessary for me to understand. I don’t need to *get* everything that Jesus is talking about. It doesn’t need to make sense for me. I don’t need to have Jesus all contained in a little convenient box for me where everything is simple and straightforward and easy to explain. That would be my preference. I would like that much more.

But I don’t get to choose the reality which makes me most comfortable. I’m *not* in control of how the world works and I don’t get to dictate how God operates. I cannot manipulate God any more than I can follow some particular set of guidelines to ensure that my prayers are answered instantaneously. I’m not in control.

God is. And in God’s world there are many things that I just don’t understand. That I *cannot* and *will not* ever understand. And I’m going to have to learn to deal with that. After all, what other choice do I have?

Where else can I turn? Just as Peter said, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."