

“My Name Shall Be There”
The Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43
John 6:56-69

The culmination of our time this summer going from David as a boy, to a young king, to a powerful ruler, then of his son Solomon taking power as king, comes this Sunday as Solomon invokes God’s power and presence in the words of covenant and blessing at the opening of the Jerusalem Temple. After this week the lectionary will skip around; next Sunday’s passage from the Hebrew Scriptures is the erotic love poetry found in Song of Solomon-- which, by the way, was probably not written by Solomon.

“Will God indeed dwell on earth?” Solomon asks in his address to Jerusalem and to God, recognizing that “Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” Nevertheless, in building the Temple, Solomon is trying to create a space where the people of Israel may go to approach God. In Celtic Christianity there is the concept of the “thin place.” It’s an odd term that may make you think about skinny countries, like Chile, or places with lots of thin people, like Los Angeles. But thin places “are much deeper than that. They are locales where the distance between heaven and earth collapses and we’re able to catch glimpses of the divine”¹

Solomon recognizes that no physical space can contain God; according to the Israelites, even God’s name was too holy to be uttered, for not even a word can contain the immense wonder of who God is. That is why, in Jewish writings, God is often referred to as “Ha-Shem” which in Hebrew means “The Name”-- you can talk *about* God’s name, but you can’t actually

¹ Eric Weiner, “When Heaven and Earth Come Closer” in *The New York Times*, March 9, 2012

say it, for it is just too holy. And yet, God had already acknowledge to Solomon that God will indeed dwell within the Temple, saying “My name shall be there.”

What does it mean to have God’s name on something? Putting God’s name on something, or someone, invokes something so powerful that it must be treated with care. I think that the reason that some progressive people of faith are reluctant to announce to their friends and coworkers, “I am a Christian,” because you know that name carries weight, a lens through which people will see you. It may mean that people think you’re more conservative than you are; who has ever said “I’m a Christian, *but* I believe gay and lesbian people should be treated with fairness and equality-- as if treating others humanely goes against Christian teachings. Or, on the flip side, you are so aware of your imperfections that you hesitate to publically call yourself Christian because you do not want others to see you as hypocritical. If I say I am a Christian at work, but then at the same time I am a terrible gossip, will people judge me not only on my character but also on my performance as a Christian?

When one family started visiting our church, their younger daughter asked me after I had transformed from my Sunday morning clothes into my clergy robe, “Are you God?” I think it is so cool that children are so ready to have an encounter with God that they can see God in just about anyone and anything. And, it makes me humble, uncomfortable because my good Presbyterian teachings instruct that there is no God but God; in the Reformed movement in Christianity, there was a movement to deemphasize the role of the priests as mediator of God, recognizing that the priest has no greater power than the priesthood of all believers to access the Holy Spirit and understand its role in their lives.

There is an added layer to the tragedy that has unfolded in the Roman Catholic church as people have gained awareness of the misconduct of priests towards children and young people, and the intentional work of the

religious hierarchy to conceal this behavior and protect the abusers. Standing alone, it is an atrocity that the abuse happened. But what makes the abuse particularly perverse is that the people who committed it were ones who bore the power of God's *name*. The impact for those they harmed did not just hurt them personally. It did not just hurt their ability to experience trust and love in safe relationships. It also damaged their trust in God, and in the church that represents Christ's presence here on earth.

Like Solomon, we have to acknowledge that no one building, no one person-- not a Temple, not a priest, not a king-- can contain all of God's presence. Not even a dazzling new digital church sign can fit the glory of God's name. And yet, we are still drawn to these spaces in search of a thin place where we might meet God. We approach the table with the bread and the cup, the elements of our Sacrament of Communion, as a thin place where we might meet God. Here is a teaser for next week, when we will share the sacrament: In John's gospel, Jesus said "I am the bread that came down from heaven...my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (John 6:41b, 55-56). To many people, this sounds like a weird, cannibalistic ritual and can be troubling. But if we look at the Greek term for "*abide*" -- *meno*-- which can also mean *remain*, it may give us a more helpful understanding. "Feeding on Jesus as [holy bread]' means remaining or abiding with Jesus. It is through this proximity-- or closeness-- that Jesus brings life to those who eat."²

Abiding or remaining with someone who tells you the road ahead will be difficult, will involve body and blood,takes courage. As for the disciples who had gathered to listen to Jesus, John's gospel tells us, many "turned back and would no longer go about with him." They had trouble abiding with him. But some, his band of 12 disciples, remained with Jesus. When I think about them, I am reminded of a story from over the summer of a young woman named Elin Ersson, a Swedish student on a flight from the

² Susan Hysten, "Commentary on John 6:56-69" on www.workingpreacher.org August 26, 2018

Gothenburg airport. She noticed there was an Afghan man on her flight who was being deported. This 21 year old refused to take her seat in protest to this man's deportation. She said, "I don't want a man's life to be taken away just because you don't want to miss your flight. I am not going to sit down until the person is off the plane." She livestreamed video feed of the event onto social media, reporting, "I am doing what I can to save a person's life. All I want to do is stop the deportation and then I will comply with the rules here. This is all perfectly legal and I have not committed a crime." She looked quite scared, just 21 years old and other angry passengers were yelling at her, and one tried to take her phone. She continued, "What is more important, a life, or your time? I want him to get off the plane because he is not safe in Afghanistan. I am trying to change my country's rules." This young woman knows something of what it means to abide, or remain, with someone. Their name matters, and they are with you.

Not all the disciples were able to abide with Jesus. They found his teachings too difficult to follow. While some responded to Jesus, "We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God," others said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" We get really hung up on *belief*, and belief can in fact be a stumbling block to faith. While I was away with my friends at the beach these past days, my friends asked me, "Leah, if they found out tomorrow scientific truth that Jesus never lived, that his existence was a myth that turned out to be made up, would you still practice Christianity?" I told them I would; to me, the teachings of Jesus have so much goodness and meaning in them that I can accept them as truth, even if we did not have the secular and religious histories that attest to Jesus' presence and teachings among us. John's passage says a few things that might be as hard to swallow as a dry, stale bagel. But commentator Susan Hylen points out that the Greek word used for belief in this passage, *pisteou*, more commonly means *to trust* or rely on someone. I'm not sure God is too concerned about the orthodoxy of our beliefs; what

matters more is whether we are able to cultivate with God a relationship of reliance and trust.

One reason we can have that relationship of reliance and trust with God, with Jesus, is because we know that God has a steadfast love for us, God's people. *Hesed*, which in Hebrew means "steadfast love" is a repeated theme in the Hebrew Bible to describe God's love for God's people. In 1 Kings, Solomon sums up the relationship: "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no other God like you on heaven or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart." And God makes clear that this *hesed*, or love, is not only available for people who have walked with God their whole lives. Although Solomon comes from a heritage going back to Abraham who considered themselves chosen as God's people, his covenant with God includes those who were not Israelites; he opened the doors of the Temple to those beyond the "chosen ones:"

"when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house,⁴³ then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you." When we are secure enough in understanding God's steadfast love for us, we are able to recognize that love as a gift to be shared with others as well.

I can tell you of my assuredness of God's **steadfast love**. I can tell you my **belief** that God is **trustworthy and reliable**. I can tell you of my confidence that God **abides**, or remains, with us, even when others may pick up and go. However, ask me about God's people-- including myself-- and I cannot always say the same three things are true. But as Christians, we have God's name on us. While not one of our bodies can fully contain who God is, scripture says we are made in God's own image. Therefore, our lives can be *thin places*, spaces where earth and heaven meet, and flesh and spirit are one. May God's Spirit lead us to that place. Amen.