

“A Full House”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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1 Kings 8:1,6,10-11, 22-30, 41-43

Psalms 84

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints, for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.”

“How lovely is your dwelling place,” the Psalmist said. If you were to imagine God’s dwelling place, where would it be? I remember a church I once served. It had clear glass paned windows throughout the sanctuary, except for the rose window, high in the balcony of lofted ceilings. I especially loved coming in there on a quiet afternoon, and laying my body down in a pew of that empty sanctuary, and feeling the color of that rose window wash over me.

Or maybe for you the lovely dwelling place for God is our own sanctuary, especially when everyone returns from their summer coming and going, and we move to the red, velvet-cushioned pews, and hear the pipe organ once again, and you see Jesus’ face reflected on the smiles of loved ones happy to greet you; you feel a holy touch in the wrinkled hand of an elderly member clasping the hand of a child, and you know God is there, basking in the beauty of it all.

Perhaps the dwelling place you have felt God the most recently has been outside church walls— perhaps at a sunset on a beach, with water lapping at your feet, or sitting outside in the country at night, listening to the symphony the crickets and the frogs make, with a distant howl from a coyote offering a solo for the moon’s benefit.

Surely King Solomon hoped that God could make a dwelling place in the majestic Jerusalem Temple he had built. Once complete, elaborate ritual marked the Temple’s dedication. First the elders and heads of tribes of each of the 12 tribes of Israel assembled there. Then, the priests carried the Ark of the Covenant— onto which they believed the *kabod*, or glory, of God rested— into the inner

chambers of the Temple, what would be called the Holy of Holies, guarded by cherub wings. And when the priests stepped out of the Holy of Holies, a cloud filled the Temple and the priests could no longer minister, because God's glory filled it completely.

When I read *this* line, I felt better about those moments when I stared blankly at the screen while trying to prepare a sermon. It can be a humbling task, trying to put God's goodness and glory into words. Who can do that? And yet I have to encourage myself to imperfectly try.

King Solomon, upon witnessing the tremendousness of God's glory, asked, ""But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" And yet he wanted it to be a symbol to the nations, and his prayer to God even asked that all people, including foreigners, would be answered by God when praying toward this building. It is a wonderfully inclusive prayer, to petition God to "do whatever the foreigners ask of you." And yet, Solomon still seems to ask this to further his glory even as it points to the glory of God— his reasoning points back to himself when he says "so they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that / have built."

No building can hold God, and no building is as eternal as God. Solomon knew that on some level— and his father, David, had been warned of such by the prophet Nathan. We know that the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed not once, but twice— first by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, and again in 70 CE— a few decades after Jesus died— Jesus' death and the destruction of the Temple were both at the hands of the Roman Empire. Today, all that remains of the Temple is one wall— which serves as a holy site for Jews coming to pray, but also as a piece of the foundation for the holy Muslim complex that includes the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, on the location from which Muslims believe their prophet Mohammed ascended into heaven.

Jesus always warned those who admired the Temple that it would once again be destroyed. He also foreshadowed a time when his resurrected body would become the Temple and the location through which we can find God.

Have you ever been inside a church building that has been repurposed into something else? I have rocked out at a few concerts at The Tabernacle in downtown Atlanta, which was once a Baptist church but now is a concert venue. I have seen churches that were repurposed as luxury loft apartments, boutique hotels, restaurants, nightclubs, and I imagine some of you have seen a play in New York City that is in a former sanctuary, converted to a theater. My friend Ashley is the pastor of Arlington Presbyterian Church in Virginia. They took down their historic church building, and created a midrise of low-income apartments, and in the lobby of that building, their church continues to meet, and hosts monthly potluck suppers with the residents of the building. A movement called “Yes, in God’s Backyard” makes an attempt to repurpose unused, or underused, church property to create affordable housing. I love that idea, and am pretty sure that God’s presence can dwell in a building like that, perhaps even more comfortably than in a beautiful, historical sanctuary.

Just because God’s home cannot be limited to one space, doesn’t mean God doesn’t make a dwelling place in the spaces where holy things happen, and in you and in me. That holy dwelling isn’t only for God’s human children. It is for all creation. Even the sparrow and the swallow, the Psalmist tells us, know on some level that the nest they build, the life they nurture within it, is a dwelling before God’s altar.

I remember when I was a seminarian, I taught at a summer youth theological academy at Emory University. I lived for those 6 weeks in the dorms where I helped supervise the teenagers. Mentor rooms were right next to the door to the outdoor exit, so that we could listen for any middle of the night escapades. But I didn’t need to worry. Because a robin had made her nest in the holly bush right next to that same door. And any student wanting to enter or leave the building risked being sky-bombed by that mama robin, which terrified them. The first time it happened to me, I did not know what hit me! Had a 16-year old just dropped their stuffy out the upstairs window? But then I saw it happen to one of the teenagers. And I realized this is one bird intent on protecting her eggs or chicks— or hope for these— at all cost. There was another exit to the building, but you had to either go up an eternally slow elevator or walk to the stairs on the other side of the building, and both ways let you out on a different level, facing a different section of the campus from where you needed to be. So you would take your

chances, timidly open the nearer door, step onto the landing, and then SMACK! You get wingslapped.

Maybe we should have that level of protection around our time together to worship God, so that my daughter wingsmacks the coach who schedules Sunday morning soccer games and you divebomb the friend who invites you to Sunday morning brunch. Twice in the past month I have been asked whether I am troubled by the rapid secularization of American culture, and the closing of churches. Of course it troubles me— and I know the viability of this church 1,2, 5 decades into the future depends on you at least as much as it depends on me to find not only the words, but also to model the welcome that this community of faith offers. Having a community of people who regularly gather in pursuit of a common purpose: how rare is that? Having a community of accountability and trust, where you can honestly bare your mistakes and regret and be loved into becoming something so much more than what you have done wrong: what other places ask us for that kind of self-reflection? A place where seniors and young people cherish each other's stories, their triumphs, and also their struggles— not because they are bound by blood, but they are bound by belonging in Christ. A place that seeks the betterment of their world, where the hungry are fed, where swords are beaten into plowshares, where the oppressed find their freedom. I know the world suffers a real detriment when those voices stop asking.

But there is more than that. Because I noticed in the past week that there are some ways that politicians posture themselves as the people who can bring about a beloved community. If that is what they are after, who am I to stand in their way? I will joyfully mark their names at the polls if what they are trying to build brings us more closely to what God envisions for us all. I believe in the separation of church and state, but that does not mean that our faith cannot inform our vote.

But there is something more that even King Solomon himself could not achieve with his pious prayers, his wise sayings, or the grand Temple he built for God. Jesus said, repeatedly in John, that if you abide in me, I will abide in you. That means that wherever we go, we have a home, a dwelling place; how lovely it is! You have a home in Jesus Christ, and Jesus has a home within you. Nothing can take that away. If you think about it too much, the glory will overwhelm you.

But it is within you: that sense of safety and protection, renewal and life. How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!