

“A CONTAINER TOO SMALL”

August 25, 2024

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

You probably have all heard the story about the Sunday School teacher who had finished the day’s lesson for her elementary age children. With some extra time left she handed out some crayons and paper and told the children to draw a picture. The teacher moved about the room to see what the children were drawing, pets, parents, houses, rainbows, the usual stuff. When she came upon one particular boy and looked at his picture, she couldn’t tell what it was.

The teacher asked the boy, “What did you draw there Freddy?”

The boy responded, “I am drawing a picture of God.”

The teacher replied, “Freddy, no one knows what God looks like.”

And the boy said, “They will when I’m finished!”

It’s not just children who think about what God is like. Many years ago Billy Graham wrote an article on the topic which began, “Once, as I was visiting the campus of a Southern university, a sophomore asked me: “What kind of a guy is God?” And an airline flight attendant once asked, as we were skimming over the beautiful Rocky Mountains from Denver to Los Angeles, “Wouldn’t it be fine if we really knew what God was like?” A university president said: “If it were possible for preachers to tell people what God is and what God is like, it would make the question of religion a good deal simpler for many people.””

Even we adults have questions about God’s nature, especially when we are going through a crisis. Fortunately, the scriptures give us some

answers, some insight into the nature of God. And that's what makes our reading today so important. However, it doesn't seem that way at first. The occasion is the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem, which Solomon built around 990 BC.

For the ceremony, King Solomon assembles leadership from all the tribes, hosts a grand parade to bring in the last item for the Temple, and finally makes many sacrifices. What's interesting about chapter 8 is that 49 out of 66 verses, or 75% of the chapter, are a prayer, by which Solomon lays out his theological understanding of God. It comes from the priestly Deuteronomistic tradition, and it is that tradition the prophets and Jesus build their faith and ministry upon. This makes it one of the most important passages in the Old Testament. So, what does Solomon tell us about the God we worship?

I. GOD IS REAL – PRESENCE CAN BE EXPERIENCED, (FELT) SPIRIT.

In 1985, journalist **Terry Anderson** was taken hostage in Lebanon and held there for 6 years and 9 months. As one might imagine, life was horrendous for Terry and the other hostages. But it was while he was in captivity that Terry began reading the Bible and engaging in some serious soul-searching. "**I was not a good husband,**" Terry confessed. He drank too much and was unfaithful to his wife. He had plenty of time to reflect on his marriage and why it failed.

Terry prayed about his problems and promised God he would do better if he were given another chance. "**I'll go to church,**" he promised

God; **"I'll give to the poor, spend my life on good causes. I'll read the Bible, try to understand what's being asked of me."**

During his captivity, Terry felt enormous anger; he hated his captors. He tried to pray for them, but it was hard. Jesus taught us to love our enemies, but Terry knew how hard that was. **"How is it right to feel anything but revulsion toward your kidnappers, your tormentors?"** he rationalized.

But all this changed when God became real to him, and he renewed his faith in Christ. There were times when he would almost chuckle, his spirit became so light. Terry says God used his captivity to deal with his sins and weaknesses. **"I drank too much -- no alcohol here. I chased women -- no women here. I'm arrogant -- what better than to put me in the hands of these arrogant, uncaring young men. I've been careless of others' feelings -- these people give not one tiny thought to mine. I've been an agnostic most of my life -- my only comforts here are the Bible and my prayers."**

During his captivity, there were times when Terry felt like giving up. "I can't do this, God," he would pray. "I'm finished. I surrender." It was at that point Terry learned to place his total trust in God's hands and let God have the last word for him.

1 Kings says, **"And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that he priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord."**

The first thing we learn is **God is real**; not a nice idea, not a figment of our imagination, not an emotion, not a philosophy. Solomon and the people experienced God's overwhelming presence as it fills the new Temple. The cloud and glory represent this, but the good news is we can experience God too. Often God is present to us in worship, prayer, silence, nature, people, bits of wisdom, providence, dreams, and the nudges of our heart. The prophets, Jesus, the disciples, and saints and sinners throughout time can all testify to occasions of being in the presence of God. Just remember God is Spirit, and not limited by time, a body, or human measurements. Often, we know we are in God's presence because something changes in us and we discover how very real God.

II. GOD IS TRUSTWORTHY, FAITHFUL KEEPS HIS PROMISES.

A certain Bishop Potter was sailing for Europe on one of the great transatlantic ocean liners back before taking cruises was popular. When he went on board, he found that another passenger was to share the cabin with him. After going to see the accommodations, he went up to the purser's desk and inquired if he could leave his gold watch and other valuables in the ship's safe.

He explained that ordinarily he never availed himself of that privilege, but he had been to his cabin and had met the man who was to occupy the other berth. Judging from his appearance, he was afraid that he might not be a very trustworthy person.

The purser accepted the responsibility for the valuables and remarked, **"It's all right, bishop, I'll be very glad to take care of them**

for you. The other man has been up here and left his for the same reason!” Finding people who are honest, trustworthy, and reliable is not always easy in this world. Many of us have been let down, lied too, and betrayed which makes it hard to trust others.

Fortunately, the second thing we learn about God is that God is trustworthy, faithful, and keeps the promises made. Solomon prays, **“O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love with your servants who walk before you with all their heart...”**

Solomon testifies that God made a promise to his father David, to keep his descendants on the throne and has fulfilled that promise. But he is also confirming God’s faithfulness to the Old Covenant and promise made to Abraham, of land, lineage, and blessing. God is trustworthy to God’s word. The Temple is a symbol of this, along with the 10 commandments, which are in the Ark of the Covenant they just placed in the Temple. Those commandments are a summary of God’s steadfast love to Israel, and to us. They are a sign of God’s loving commitment to those who would follow. God is trustworthy.

III. GOD IS DEEP AND WIDE.

There is an old Vacation Bible School song called “Deep and Wide”.

The lyrics are:

Deep and wide

Deep and wide

There's a fountain flowing deep and wide

That song describes a third characteristic of God's nature. God is deep and wide. Amazingly, Solomon picks up on this idea when he prays, **“But will God indeed dwell on earth? (rhetorical question) Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built”** The norm of the time was to claim god as their own, to enshrine god in various temples, and make idols of god to carry in your pocket and place on the mantel like some good luck charm.

But Solomon is wise enough to know God is deeper and wider than any building that was erected by human hands. No edifice can house God. God is too big. God can't be regulated to fit in a church building nor into our small ideas about God. God is greater.

Even more amazing Solomon writes, **“Likewise when foreigners, who are not of your people Israel, come from a distant land because of your name...so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel,..”**

Solomon has the brilliant insight that God is deeper and wider than any one nation. In fact, God cares about the other people groups of the world, not just Israel. What a good reminder to all of us!

America does not own God. Presbyterians aren't closer to God than the Baptists. No religious group or political party or ethnic group, or cause organization have the goods on God. No church building, no matter how fancy, can hold God. God is deeper and wider. God is seeking all people and making God's self known to the world, thus the mission nature of the church. The God we follow is real but also greater than our deepest

thoughts, and has arms wide enough to embrace the world with love and grace. God is big.

IV. “MY NAME SHALL BE THERE”

Amateur radio came into being after radio waves were adapted into a communication system in the 1890’s by the Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi. The term “ham radio” may have originated in 1908 when the Harvard Radio Club operated the original first amateur wireless station with the call sign HAM. In 1909, the Wireless Association of America’s First Annual Wireless Blue Book listed 89 amateur radio stations in the USA and Canada. Today, about three million amateur radio operators are currently active worldwide

Amateur radio operators are granted an amateur radio license by a governmental regulatory authority after passing an examination on applicable regulations, electronics, radio theory, and radio operation. As a component of their license, amateur radio operators are assigned a **call sign** that they use to identify themselves and thus their location during communication. Depending on the signal strength and weather, one can contact people all over the world by radio signal.

Well believe it or not God gives us a call sign in this passage. **“O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today, that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place you said, ‘My NAME shall be there’...Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; hear and forgive.”**

Jesus said, 1000 years later, **“My father’s house shall be called a house of prayer.”**

Like a radio the Temple’s main function was to transmit our prayers to God and listen for God’s response. Solomon prayed that God would watch over the people, forgive their sins and keep them on the covenant path in the name of the One whom they serve and follow. This is only possible because God desires a relationship, because God can hear, see, forgive, and sustain.

In one of her books, **Anne Lamott** tells the story of a 7-year-old girl who got lost in the large town where she lived. A police officer stopped to help. He put her in his squad car and slowly drove her through several nearby neighborhoods, hoping she’d spot a familiar landmark.

Suddenly the girl pointed to a church. **“You can let me out now,”** she said. “Are you sure?” replied the officer.

She answered, **“This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.”**

That is what each church building represents. It is not so much the home of God, after all God is deeper and wider, It is a place that reminds us God is real, God is trustworthy, and that God communicates with us. Why? Because God is where we find our true home. Come and know this God who welcomes you, calls you, and sends you out to serve in the name above all names. Amen.

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

Sunday, August 25, 2024

Second Scripture Lesson

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

¹Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of the city of David, which is Zion.

⁶Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim.

¹⁰And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord,

¹¹so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.

²²Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. ²³He said, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, ²⁴the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand. ²⁵Therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant my father David that which you promised him, saying, 'There shall never fail you a successor before me to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your children look to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me.' ²⁶Therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you promised to your servant my father David. ²⁷"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! ²⁸Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O LORD my God, heeding the cry and the prayer

that your servant prays to you today; ²⁹that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. ³⁰Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive.

⁴¹"Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name ⁴²—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, ⁴³then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.

This is the Word of the Lord.
Thanks be To God.