

Where is God?

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Where is God? This is a question raised by our lessons today. It is also a question we hear people ask, and perhaps have asked ourselves. “Where is God?” some of ask in the face of violence or hunger or natural disaster. “Where is God?” we sometimes wonder when someone we love dies. “Where is God?” we may ponder when the liturgy fails to speak to our minds or warm our hearts. “Where exactly is God?” we may ask ourselves in a moment of reflection.

In the lesson from Samuel today, King David is a man who is seen as blessed by God. He has experienced God’s presence and guidance in response to personal prayer, in the words of the prophet Nathan, in the turn of events, and in worship in the tent of meeting. In this lesson, we meet him at the height of his military, political and personal success. He is at the top of his game. His newly completed home is made of cedar, the most expensive wood in his day. As he contemplates this home, this symbol of his blessedness, he thinks of God’s house – which hardly compares in grandeur. It is a simple tent where the ark of the covenant is kept. He decides that he would like to have built a grander, more elegant house for God. It seems a noble intention, if somewhat after the

fact. Nathan the prophet's first response to David's idea is an unqualified "Yes, go ahead!"

But, then, God speaks. And God says "No." Specifically God says, "Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word . . . saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"

Apparently, God does not want to live in an elegant temple. God wants to do what God has always done, that is move among his people. It seems as if God wants to be mobile, free to hang out with the people, free to go where they go. His place is among the people, not in a structure, however lovely.

Nor does God want David the beloved to become confused about who is "housing" whom. God reminds David that it was God who recruited David the young, humble shepherd to lead Israel. And, God adds, "I was with you wherever you went."

This exchange between God and David through the prophet Nathan gives us in the 21st century pause as we think about our mission and our church buildings. God chooses to be primarily out

in the world, among the people. He does not want others to perceive him as confined to a worship space, however lovely. As God's representatives on earth, it seems that we are similarly called to extend our ministry more and more from this space out into the world.

The lesson from Ephesians underlines this same point. Where is God here? God is dwelling in the midst of His people. God abides in a spiritual community of diverse people held together by Jesus, the one willing to suffer violence so that we might be reconciled to one another and to God, the one who is our peace. The author of Ephesians says that God's house is built of people. The first stone laid is the God man Jesus. On him the rest of the human building is built. As the cornerstone, Jesus the Christ is the one who holds the initial walls together, and sets the direction for the rest of the building. Because Jesus Christ is the cornerstone, the apostles, the prophets and saints like us can come together in our diversity and be a dwelling place for God. Without Jesus the Christ our differences divide us. Rather than Christians in community, we become individuals whose identities are shaped by elements other than our faith: perhaps our socio-economic status, our political affiliation, our level of education or our race. With Christ, we are

welcomed in our uniqueness to be formed into a human community, a temple of people where God is delighted to dwell.

Finally in the gospel, we again find the God-man Jesus among the people. He has just experienced the cruel beheading and death of his cousin John the Baptist. Certainly he would have liked some private time to process that. His disciples have just returned from their first missionary journey. He sees that they are tired. Twice he says "Come away and rest." Jesus knew that Sabbath time was important for both him and his apostles . . .

Where is God? He is among us, among his people. Where are we? Hopefully in the world, where God can work through us to make his presence known.