

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
June 4, 2017

## **God is Close**

Zechariah 4:1-14

In many parts of the Christian faith, today is a time to remember the gift of the Holy Spirit, who came upon Jesus' followers who were gathered in Jerusalem. After telling us in his Gospel about Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Luke uses his second volume, the book of Acts, to narrate the ongoing life and mission of the community of Christ's people, the church. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon the church to inspire its unity and to empower it for the spread of the gospel into Jerusalem and beyond.

Because the Holy Spirit shows up in such dramatic fashion at Pentecost, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that the Spirit is way more than just a New Testament thing. The Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit, as God's powerful, life-giving presence, is rooted in the Jewish faith, especially as manifested in the Old Testament. In Israel's Scriptures, God repeatedly promises to dwell among his people. Sometimes this promise is linked to a specific locale, such as the Tabernacle or "tent of meeting," the portable sanctuary used by the Israelites during their journey following the exodus. Sometimes the very encampment of the Israelites is viewed as the place where God dwells. And sometimes, the Temple itself is understood as God's dwelling place among his people.

That's one of the reasons why many of the stories in the Old Testament have to do with either the building or the rebuilding of the Temple. The Temple, and the whole city of Jerusalem, were destroyed in 586/587 BC, when the Babylonians captured the holy city, torched it, and exiled the Judean leadership to Babylon. Later on, King Cyrus of Persia, who had conquered the Babylonian empire in 539 BC, permitted the Judeans to return to their land and rebuild the Temple. The book of Zechariah, from which we get this morning's Scripture passage, is one of the texts that describes how God's prophets urged the leaders and the people to reconstruct the holy sanctuary.

Reconstruction began with the building of the altar, so that sacrifices could be made. The second phase was the laying of the foundation of the Temple. As work progressed, the reaction of the people was mixed. Some rejoiced that the foundation was laid, but others, especially some of the priests, were disappointed because they viewed the quality of construction as inferior to the previous Temple. Resistance from the local population, combined with a lack of enthusiasm among the people, slowed down progress, and it eventually took twenty years to rebuild the dwelling place of God.

This helps us understand the middle portion of today's text from Zechariah 4. In a vision, an angel tells Zechariah that the Lord has a word for Zerubbabel, the governor of the region. As the one in authority, Zerubbabel is overseeing the reconstruction of the Temple. In the face of resistance and lack of enthusiasm about the whole rebuilding project, the Lord wants Zerubbabel to know that what he needs, more than anything else, isn't human might or strength, but God's Spirit (v. 6-7). If it were a matter of Zerubbabel's strength, he wouldn't stand a chance against the mountain of opposition he faces. But because the

success of the project is riding on God's presence and power, Zerubbabel can rest assured that the Lord's dwelling place will be completed.

Kyle Idleman tells about an experience where he learned about the importance of God's presence and power in his ministry. He writes:

When I started a new church in Los Angeles County, California, I found that I was overwhelmed with pressure and stress. I was working more than seventy hours a week. My wife would ask me to take a day off, and I would say, "I can't." I wasn't sleeping at night, and I started to take sleeping pills. When the church was about a year old, I woke up in the night, and I had this strange sense that God was laughing at me. As I lay in bed, I wondered, *Why is God laughing at me?*

It would take five years before I finally got an answer to that question. Here's how it happened: when we moved into our current house, I saved the heaviest piece of furniture for last—the desk from my office. As I was pushing and pulling the desk with all my might, my four-year-old son came over and asked if he could help. So together we started sliding it across the floor. He was pushing and grunting as we inched our way along. After a few minutes, my son stopped pushing, looked up at me, and said, "Dad, you're in my way." And then he tried to push the desk by himself. Of course it didn't budge. Then I realized that he thought he was actually doing all the work, instead of me. I couldn't help but laugh.

The moment I started laughing at my son's comment, I recalled that middle-of-the-night incident and I realized why God was laughing at me. I thought I was pushing the desk. I know that's ridiculous, but instead of recognizing God's power and strength, I started to think it all depended on me.<sup>1</sup>

Through the prophet Zechariah, the Lord said, "Zerubbabel, remember that though you are the builder, the completion of the Temple doesn't depend on you. It ultimately depends on me. Not by human might or power, but by my Spirit." In fact, at the conclusion of the project, when the capstone is brought out and the people shout, "God bless it! God bless it!, Zerubbabel will have an opportunity to remember that the Lord is the one who has enabled him to finish the job.

When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, Jesus was giving his followers the strength they would need to do the job of spreading the gospel. Remember that at the end of his Gospel, Luke tells us that right before Jesus ascended, he told his people not to lift a finger in the kingdom mission until they were "clothed with power from on high" (24:49). In other words, their first assignment was to stay put and wait. This was the Pentecost version of "Not by human might or power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord.

J. D. Greear describes a period in his ministry when he knew a lot of truths about God but sensed very little relationship with God. According to Greear,

It seemed that everything God had done, he had done in the past: he created the world, died on a cross, and then inspired a Bible to tell about it. Then he gave us a mission and left through the clouds. God seemed like a busy teacher who had given an assignment and then stepped out of the room, leaving his students to get it done on their own.<sup>2</sup>

Greear goes on to talk about how, with time, he experienced a renewed sense of relationship with God through the work of the Holy Spirit. He rediscovered the fact that God isn't a distant deity, the resident ruler of heaven who has exited from our space and left us to get the job done on our own. On the contrary, God is close. God is present in saving power. Jesus told his disciples that his departure would mean the Spirit's arrival. So

Greear asks, "Do you consider your connection to the Holy Spirit so strong and real that you regard his presence *in* you to be a better advantage than even Jesus himself *beside* you?"<sup>3</sup>

God present in us. God present through us. That's the kind of God who gives his people the vision and the strength to construct a Temple, and then after years of oppression, devastation, and destruction, to rebuild the Temple again. Remember that Zechariah wasn't the mouthpiece for a non-resident divine administrator who keeps a safe distance from the world he has made. No, Zechariah speaks for "the Lord of all the earth" (v. 14), who is certainly beyond his creation but also close to his creation, actively dwelling in it and working to save it, always with an eye toward establishing justice and peace.

In our text, the angel stirs Zechariah from his sleep and asks him, "What do you see?" Zechariah says, "I see a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lights on it, with seven channels to the lights. Also there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left" (v. 2-3). A lampstand and olive trees. These may seem strange to our eyes, but in Zechariah's context they were symbols of the light-giving and life-giving presence of God. And so was the Temple itself. The Temple signified that God the Creator, the source of light and life, is determined to be vitally present in the world, in and through his people.

In 1 Corinthians, as he exhorts the believers to unity, Paul asks, "Do you not know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?" (3:16). Note that the pronouns in Paul's question are plural. "You [*plural*] are the temple of God." "God's Spirit lives in you [*plural*]." The image here is of God actively dwelling in the gathered community of the faithful. God taking up residence in the church. Now this doesn't mean that if you want to find God, you have to go to 7345 Indian Head Highway, Bryans Road, Maryland 20616, as if the Spirit of God can be localized in a sacred building. But it does mean that we as a congregation are God's primary way of establishing his presence in the world and bringing together the things of heaven and the things of earth.

The existence of this fellowship, gathering in this building, in this particular location, is a sign to the community that God is close. Our church doesn't just have a sign; we are a sign. We're a sign that instead of abandoning humankind to its own alienation and self-destruction, God has come through Jesus, and the promised Holy Spirit, to save us and to be with us. In fact, we're a sign that God comes so close as to inhabit the heart and life of every single individual who receives Christ as Lord and Savior. How much closer can God get than that?

As we hear in the song, "Make My Heart Your Dwelling Place":

Make my heart Your dwelling place  
A temple just for You  
A consecrated resting place,  
A vessel ever true  
Make my heart a fire,  
With the brightness of Your Son,  
Make my heart a dwelling place,  
For the Holy One.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kyle Idleman, *Not a Fan* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011) 96-97.

<sup>2</sup> J. D. Greear, *Jesus, Continued . . . : Why the Spirit Inside You is Better Than Jesus Beside You* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan) Kindle edition.

<sup>3</sup> Greear, *Jesus, Continued . . .*

<sup>4</sup> Jim Cowan, "Make My Heart Your Dwelling Place." International Liturgy Publications, 1986.