

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
November 19, 2023

A Place for God

1 Kings 8:22-30

By now, many of you already know whose house you will be at this Thursday. Some of you may still be waiting for word, or for an invitation. Some of you are hosting the gathering at your place. You'll do your best to help folks feel welcome. After all, it's not just about having a space. It's about cultivating a sense of home. Thanksgiving becomes an occasion to reconnect with home, to renew your sense of rootedness in relationships that help make you who you are.

That's the way many people experience life in the church. This congregation is home. This community of believers is where you feel welcomed and known and loved. It's where you have deep relationships that shape your sense of identity and purpose. When we say that this is God's house, we're not just saying that this physical space is where we meet the Lord and experience his presence, though that is certainly true. It's also God's house because there's a spiritual family that gathers in it, sharing the love of Christ with one another.

Author Henry van Dyke wrote: "There are a hundred touches of kindness that come to us every day to tell us that we are not orphans or outcasts upon the earth. Every trace of order, every gleam of beauty, every provision of bounty in the natural world, is an evidence that it is God's house."¹ So perhaps we should think of today's worship service as a gathering in God's house, within God's larger house, the entire creation. Every day, no matter where we are, Thanksgiving or not, we're occupying part of God's space.

Solomon had a strong sense of God's universal presence. He expresses it in today's text from 1 Kings. "But will God really dwell on earth?" asks Solomon, in a rhetorical fashion. "The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (v. 27). This is Solomon praying at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. Recall that Solomon's father David had offered to build "a house" for God, a structure to house the presence of God as reflected by the Ark of the Covenant. But God turned the tables and said he would actually build a house for David, a symbolic reference to an everlasting dynasty from David's descendants. That's why Solomon is now on the throne. He has not only built himself a palace but has successfully embarked on a project to construct a dwelling place for God. Now he leads the people in a dedication ceremony.

Solomon stands before the altar, spreads out his hands toward heaven, and offers a really long prayer that begins by acknowledging how incomparable God is. God, says Solomon, is unlike the other deities of Israel's neighbors. His rule can't be tied to a particular locale on earth, or even in heaven or the highest heaven. The Lord can't be contained or manipulated by human beings.

One person tells the story about a five year old who asks his mother, "Is God everywhere?" "Yes," said the mother. "Well, is he here in this room?" asks the child. "Yeah, sure he is." "Is he here on the table?" "Well, uh, yeah, in a sense I suppose he is. I can go with that," replied the mother. The child slowly picks up an open box and slams it shut, "Got him!"²

When he and the people assembled in God's presence to dedicate the completed temple, a house for the Lord, Solomon didn't raise his hands toward heaven then glance at the congregation and say, "Got him!" Instead, he led the worshipers in recognizing God's unmatched, uncontainable majesty and glory.

At first glance, it may seem hard to hold those two together. On the one hand, the Lord is completely transcendent, wholly other. He's free from our control, management, or manipulation. This infinite God defies any human confines. But on the other hand, Solomon builds him a house. So which is it? Is God in heaven or on earth? Is God universal or local? Is God beyond us or with us?

The way Solomon prays, God is both. "The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" This wood frame, insulation, drywall, and exterior of brick can't keep you inside. These rafters and this roof can't keep your glory from filling the skies. You are far above and beyond any of the boundaries created by human architecture. "Yet give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy, O Lord my God," prays Solomon (v. 28a). So the Lord is also accessible, readily available, responsive to those who seek him and call upon him for help. Though wholly transcendent, God is not remote or indifferent.

In an episode of the science fiction drama *The X-Files*, there's a scene where agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully are discussing a prison chaplain who claims that God speaks directly to him. When Mulder expresses skepticism that such a thing could ever happen, Scully asks, "Don't you think that God can talk with people?" Mulder replies, "God is just a spectator. He only reads the box scores."

Solomon doesn't pray like he's talking to someone who's just a spectator. He speaks to a God who has already spoken. "You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it—as it is today" (v. 24). So this is no detached deity, but rather a God who has called and created a people and has bound who he is and what he's doing to these people in a covenant of love, worked out in this earthly realm.

In fact, the whole cosmos is his realm. That's the ultimate foundation for the construction of the temple, as well as its dedication. The temple is less about a house or dwelling for God's presence and more about the reality of God's reign. The temple is a reminder of God's kingship. It's a sign of God's enthroning, an enthroning that's not limited by any place. That's why Solomon prays to God as one who can't be contained by heaven or the highest heaven. God's sovereign love and saving presence extend to the entirety of creation.

Speaking from a Christian perspective, theologian Abraham Kuyper has said, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry 'Mine!'"³ That includes the spaces and places where we spend our lives, our days, including Thanksgiving. As I noted earlier, for many of us Thanksgiving helps renew our sense of place. That may mean returning to a place you call "home." Or it may mean sinking deeper roots in another place that's far from your geographical home. It may mean cultivating and solidifying relationships that give you a satisfying sense of location in this world. Whatever and wherever that place is, Solomon's prayer-filled dedication of holy space in the holy city still testifies to the good news of a God who governs in your space.

For many people, that space, that place is less clearly defined than it used to be. As one person has put it, "One of the ways to describe postmodernity is to say that we're only rushing through places and not ever settling into any place."⁴ If that's the case, then we're missing out on the ways that a sense of place can help strengthen our sense of identity and purpose, our sense of belonging somewhere.

In the 2009 film *Up in the Air*, George Clooney plays Ryan Bingham, a corporate downsizer whose work takes him all over the country conducting company layoffs on behalf of employers. He also gives motivational speeches, using the analogy, "What's in Your Backpack?", where he emphasizes the freedom that comes without burdensome relationships and material possessions. So Bingham is all about independence, which is even reflected in his constant air travel. He essentially lives on airplanes and is "at home" in airports. One of his goals is to earn ten million frequent flyer miles with American Airlines. On one of his flights home, the crew announces that Bingham has just crossed that mark. American Airlines' chief pilot is aboard and wants to personally congratulate him, noting that he's the youngest person to achieve that milestone. The captain sits down in an empty seat next to Bingham and engages him in a brief conversation, which ends with the captain asking, "So, where are you from?" Bingham pauses, glances down, and says, "I'm from here."

For Bingham, "here" was basically "nowhere." The road, or in this case the air, was his life. There was a poignancy in his answer to the captain's question. The uprootedness, the lack of a sense of place, conveyed a certain hollowness.

If this Thanksgiving prompts or provides space for you to reflect on your own sense of place in this world, I pray that you'll see who you are, and where you are, in light of the good news of God's sovereign love, revealed most fully and decisively in Jesus Christ. We're nearing that season of the year when we focus even more intensely on how the God of heaven descended to be with us in this earthly realm we inhabit. What Solomon prayed is true. The heavens could not contain this God. He doesn't live in a house. He showed up here where we are, in human form, in Jesus, to make known and make effective his governance of this world. There is no place that's not his place, which means we can meet him locally, in a sanctuary like this, and know him personally, in hearts like ours, because he cares about us and wants us to be in relationship with him.

There's an old parable from the Jewish tradition which says, "How big is your God? So big that the entire universe cannot contain him and so small that he can live in your heart."⁵ That's the mystery that Solomon prayed and proclaimed, and that we still pray and proclaim, especially during the weeks ahead.

Marian Liataud writes about how she and her family moved many times. At one point, they even sold everything and moved onto a boat, which became their floating home for the next year. She assumed that her husband and four sons would love adventure and new challenges, which they did. "But they like it best," she says, "when there's a safe harbor to return to. Like the kind a home provides. And by that I mean a home built on a foundation, not the floating kind." She goes on to say, "I discovered this truth in the course of house hunting after our live-aboard year had ended. When we asked our sons which house they liked best of the ones we were considering, Jackson, then 12, sighed and said, 'I just want a place that stays a place.'"⁶

Your place in this world, while it includes location and geography, involves way more. Depending on the person, there will always be years spent in the same place, or relocations, or moves near and far, or return trips home. But for the believer, the place that stays a

place is life under the reign of Christ. That's your home. That's the space where you're meant to reside. The good news is that wherever you are, you can live in that space, under the loving sovereignty of the Lord, for the praise of his glory.

¹ From *The Upward Path*. Quoted in Christianity Today. November 17, 1997. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1997/november17/7td060.html> (November 15, 2023).

² Jeremy Begbie, "What's Mysterious About Worship?" Lecture delivered at Regent College (Vancouver, BC) on May 26, 2014.

³ Quoted by Richard J. Mouw, "Abraham Kuyper: A Man for This Season." Christianity Today. October 26, 1998. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1998/october26/8tc086.html> (May 3, 2023).

⁴ Norman Wirzba quoted in Elyse Durham, "Can Staying Home Help Us Regain a Sense of Place?" Christianity Today. April 22, 2020. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/april-web-only/earth-day-creation-care-staying-home-regain-sense-of-place.html> (November 16, 2023).

⁵ As told by Rolf Jacobson. Working Preacher. Brainwave 798 (August 22, 2021).

⁶ Marian V. Liataud, "The Spiritual Discipline of Not Staying Put." Today's Christian Woman. February 20, 2012. http://blog.todayschristianwoman.com/2012/02/the_spiritual_discipline_of_no.html (January 11, 2014).