



Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 22nd, 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43](#)

[Psalm 84](#)

[John 6:56-69](#)

*How dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord of hosts! *
My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.*

Good morning, and God's blessings be with you all. Together, we give thanks to God for the rain to refresh this dry earth, and for the cool that brings relief from the heat like we have never experienced so intensely for so prolonged a period in this region. Together, we pray for people across this region, this nation, and this world as this coronavirus pandemic sweeps more intensely through the population – we pray for protection and renewed energy and your presence with all working in healthcare, and we pray for a sense of deeper attentiveness and care among all people. Together, we pray for nations and people torn by strife – for the people of Afghanistan, and the people of Haiti.

This Sunday is a joyful day for us as we celebrate holy baptism for two people, and as we join them in renewing our own baptismal vows.

This Sunday and this week we note especially, God dwelling with us.

We come to that point in the Old Testament stories of the kings of Israel, when Solomon has built a temple for the kingdom of Israel, as a house of prayer for all people and a dwelling place for God in their midst. For hundreds of years since the children of Israel first fled from bondage in Egypt and then received the covenant and law from God in the wilderness, God had dwelt among them in a unique way in the tent called the tabernacle – as the God who was on the move with them. Now, Solomon follows through on a desire his father David had to build a temple of stone and wood, in a place that would be known as the center of life for Israel as a nation.

It was no small feat. This somewhat small but richly ornate temple and its grounds took a lot of effort and time and resources. Solomon even instituted forced labor – slavery – on his people to build the temple in order to get the work done and to have everyone give their part. This leaves us with a big question, as we think about how “Solomon the Wise” got this great dream of his fulfilled: to build a temple, Solomon put his own people – who had been freed by God's care and might – back into the bondage they had known in Egypt. He eventually released them all from their time of bondage after completion of the temple (oh, and also his own palace that was even bigger). So, maybe we might think of this like a time of required enlistment like we have had in military service in the U.S., or the public service of men in the CCC or WPA during the Great Depression. And, maybe we might hold this in relation to how New Testament writers speak of us becoming slaves or bonded servants of the Gospel of Christ – just as the people of Israel had pledged themselves to be bound to the law and covenant of God. None of that language in the New Testament fits neatly with our very American preference to think about the total “freedom” we imagine is what comes with life with God. Perhaps true freedom in and with God is something we experience as we accept Jesus' invitation to take his yoke upon ourselves – to be bound to and to submit ourselves to God's

loving direction. And still, at the same time, we can ask the question, did Solomon really do a good thing the way he got the temple built?

But here we are, then, standing with Solomon before the finished temple. The priests have taken the ark of God into the temple, and the temple has filled with a cloud of God's presence so thick that they cannot see or move about. All stand outside, with Solomon, in awe and hope and wonder – and in prayer. And Solomon prays before the altar outside. And he asks, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even the heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built." Oh, God, you are so much greater than all our efforts to make some kind of space to hold you. But then he asks, "Hear my plea." Hear my cry. Please hear my prayer whenever I turn to this place to pray. Please hear the prayers of all the people of Israel, your chosen people, when they come to you and turn to you here to pray – hear them and forgive them. Please hear the prayers of any foreigner, any visitor and stranger in this land, and fulfill their prayers, so that you may be known as God. You are everywhere and beyond everywhere. But please listen especially from this place – let this place be a channel, an especially known point of connection, between you and all the people of the earth.

This is our prayer, our hope, for the building of St. Luke's as a space dedicated to prayer and to seeking God – that we and all who come here will find God and be heard by God.

A generation before Solomon's great dedication, when his father David wanted to build a temple, God sent Nathan the prophet to David to remind him that no dwelling could hold God. But God honored David's desire by promising to build David a house.

Even so, God chose to dwell among us. But perhaps the house was not to be a permanent dwelling made of stone and wood, after all. As wonderful as such places are. Maybe the house of God is something different.

This last week, Christians celebrated the feast day of St. Mary the God-bearer. Mary, as we sang in one of our hymns today, was chosen by God to be God's earthly sanctuary, the channel through which God incarnate would come among us and walk among us and dwell and journey with us in this world. Mary willingly accepted God's invitation, and she allowed her own life and the life of her family to be altered completely. We have the same invitation to us, as Jesus invites us to a level of closeness and intimacy of indwelling that we can hardly imagine. Jesus, the Word made flesh and dwelling among us, says to all of us, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

Behold, the dwelling of God is among and within mortals. The temple of God is not a place made of stone and wood, of steel and other materials. Such places can indeed help us open to the truer and deeper mystery – that the temple of God is us. The temple of God is each of us as we accept this strange invitation of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. The temple of God is us, together – and we come to know and abide with Christ more fully as we abide with one another and open our hearts to each other.

So, will we say "Yes" to Jesus' strange, radical invitation to an intimacy that involves his own body and blood, mingled with our own as we receive him into ourselves – our own bodies, our minds, our hearts? "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength." Let no corner of your life be withheld or reserved from God. Let all of you – every fiber of your being – be opened to God as a dwelling-place. Let yourself say with the Psalm-writer, as you open yourself to be God's temple, "How dear to me is your dwelling-place, O Lord of hosts!" This flesh, this mind and heart, this that is my house and my being – it is dear to me, and it is yours as a dwelling place, O God.

This is what Jesus is truly getting at when he uses such strong words like “eat my flesh and drink my blood.” He means, “Take me in. I am food to you. Just as I am God incarnate as human, I will be God incarnate for you in bread and wine, and in every word I speak, and in everything I offer of myself. Take me in, and you will become a house of God incarnate – a temple on the move through this world as we abide together and you abide with each other.

How will we respond to such an intense and (let’s be honest) rattling, disturbingly intense invitation? Will we withdraw ourselves from the scene, as many disciples did? Will we pull away when things get literally too close for comfort? Or will we respond like Peter – even Peter, who with the other disciples is finding Jesus’ intensity just a little alarming – Peter who manages to say, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Will we stay with the One who opens the gateway into the all-encompassing cloud of God?

As the hymn says, I hope we can all continue to make our prayer – and I hope that you, Jeffrey, and you, Oliver (and you his parents and godparents) can make this your prayer: “Come, abide within me. May my soul, like Mary, be thine earthly sanctuary.” It is from this point, when you accept this great invitation of the God who desires to dwell in and embrace fully all of us – it is from this point on that the adventure that has already begun for you continues onward in a fullness you have not yet imagined. For you, Jeffrey, at this time in your lifelong journey of seeking truth and seeking the God of love and light and life – as you have found a home with us in the Episcopal Church, this branch of the great tree of Christian life, as you willingly and fully dive in. May God fill you, surround you, abide with you deeply, and flow in the Holy Spirit through you to others. May you be God’s holy dwelling, on the move. For you, little Oliver, as your parents and godparents and family bring you at this beginning of your journey that will unfold with wonder and surprise. May God fill you in this moment and from this time on, and may you grow throughout your life knowing and sensing deeply that God has claimed you as a holy space, a holy dwelling.

Friends in Christ, God is on the move through us. We are God’s dwelling, God’s temple – together, and each.

Such high and deep intensity!
Such an invitation!
Such a profound charge!

God binds himself to us.
And we, by inviting God into ourselves, become bound to God.

No matter what our life and circumstances.
No matter what moments in history we treat through, now or in the future.
No matter what affliction, upheaval, joy, calamity, or surprise we encounter.
We are God’s temple, on the move – and through us, we little incarnations of Christ in us and one with us – through us, God touches all.

Take Christ in. Become one with Christ, as Christ wishes to offer to you. And allow Christ to dwell in you as God’s holy temple. Each of us, and all together. For the sake of the world God loves so very dearly.