

SERMON “Beyond, Beside, and Within”
Reverend Lisa Eleck
August 22, 2021

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

Dedication of the Temple

8 Then 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.

Solomon’s Prayer of Dedication

22 Then 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! ²⁸Have regard to 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 towards this house, the place of which you said, “My name shall be there”, that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays towards this place. ³⁰Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards 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 towards 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.

SERMON “Beyond, Beside, and Within”

“ ‘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!’”

Solomon just built a marvelous temple for God. Yet in his wisdom he proclaims that the heavens cannot contain God. So how can any structure, no matter how marvelous or dedicated to God it is contain God?

Solomon knows we can't confine the God of the heavens and all the earth into one temple and I might add, one church. God is everywhere. That's foundational to our faith. It's basic to the Hebrew Bible. We see God in creation. We see God in people. We see this since the beginning of time. In the Creation story, God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God was with Abraham and Moses. God was with the Israelites as they journeyed to the promised land. Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us. God was and is with God's people.

Solomon celebrated the building of the temple, as a place to pray toward God. He asks God to have his eyes “open night and day towards this house, the place of which you said, “My name shall be there”, that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays towards this place. Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling-place”

We encounter God in the temple, or our church, through prayer, through coming together as people in prayer. But we cannot confine the God of the heavens. We can encounter God in our churches. But God does not live in our churches. Church is the place that can draw people closer to God as community of believers. More than any building, the Church is the community of believers.

Yes we gather on Sunday mornings in church – to connect with God, to be renewed, to be restored, to be refreshed, and to be reminded that we are community of faith. Being church is what we are doing when we gather in prayer – in praise and thanksgiving to God. This building enables us to do that. We are also church through all the ways we learn about God and all the ways God is present in our world, through our Zoom psalm series and our after worship book studies. Our faith grows and is manifested in our studies, through our stories and in our actions.

And as a church, we are called move beyond the building. We are church when we reach out to others. Yes, this building enables us to do that through those who use this space – the other two congregations that use our sanctuary, the children and parents of the Family Matters

program, those who attended Pam Nelson's faith programs, and even neighborhood men who use our basketball courts and consider this their "church." It is the place where we gather to reach out to others – for making meals together for those who rely on Calvary St. George's for food (pre- COVID), supporting the Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport and those who make use of it offerings, and contributing to programs of the UCC and its five different outreach offerings, and today, to assemble backpacks full of school supplies.

And Solomon's prayer to God, in front of God's people, also reminded them that their house of prayer was to be a place of welcome for foreign people. And Solomon asks God to hear and answer their prayers as well. Solomon's prayer to God was public prayer and the nature of praying in a public event, is to talk to God but also to talk to people. When praying in public, the leader is asking God, but also teaching the people.

Solomon taught his people to welcome the stranger when he prayed to God, "when a foreigner comes and prays towards this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling-place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you ... so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built."

Solomon already understood that God hears the prayers of all people. In praying for that, he also encourages God's people to welcome the foreigner, the stranger, to the temple he has built. He asked God, and in essence God's people, to welcome them, to hear their pleas and to answer their prayers.

This summer we have collected school supplies for children. We do not know them or their personal situations. They are strangers to us but they are God's beloved children. And their request is for backpacks and school supplies. So we responded eagerly to meet their request. We have purchased school supplies and backpacks for them. And now we look forward to putting them together and offering a blessing over them.

So let us now assemble these backpacks in joy and in hope that the children will find joy as they receive them! Let it be so!