

2 Christmas
January 3, 2016
Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose
Jeremiah 31:7-14
Psalm 84:1-8
Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a
Luke 2:41-52

The prophet Jeremiah understood that the temple in Jerusalem was the physical symbol of the presence of the invisible God. He had seen Israel conquered, the temple destroyed, and the people marched into exile in Babylon. Jeremiah promised that the Lord would gather the people from the ends of the earth, wherever they had been scattered, and bring them home again. Even those too ill to travel would be guided by the Lord on a level road so they would not stumble. He would guard them like a shepherd. Jeremiah promised hope and joy to the exiles of Israel, because they would no longer be separated from God, but would be blessed again by living where God dwells.

David wrote in Psalm 84 about the Dwelling Place of God. He wrote to celebrate the sense of joy that comes from God dwelling with mortals; and because the temple on Mount Zion was a place of God's presence. Faithful people's longing for God took the form of pilgrimages. One day in the temple courts is better than a thousand anywhere else. There is incomparable value to being in the place of the presence of God even for the shortest time and in the most minimal way.

David wrote in verse 2, "my king and my God." James Mays wrote of this double title that it means something like "the sovereign power of the universe and the center of my personal life, the one who makes all things cohere for the life I have to live." Pilgrimage, movement to God's presence is a profound symbol of the centering and direction of all of life.

Psalm 84 beautifully describes the human yearning for God, the longing to be at a place (physical or relational) because God has made it a place of Presence.

Paul wrote about God's presence through Christian eyes. We are adopted as God's children, and through Jesus Christ, God's Spirit lives in us. Paul says that God's presence in us and with us results in our receiving spiritual gifts of wisdom and revelation.

I found this wonderful story about God's dwelling place:

Every day after school, the son of a well-known rabbi would enter his house, place his backpack on the dining room table, leave the house through the back door, and head into the woods behind the house.

At first, the rabbi gave little thought to his son's ritual. But it continued for days, and then for weeks. Every day, out into the woods for almost a half an hour. Then the rabbi grew concerned.

"My son," he said one day. "I notice that every day you leave our home and spend time in the woods. What is it that you are doing there?"

"Oh, Papa," the son replied. "There is no need to worry. I go into the woods to pray. It is in the woods that I can talk to God."

"Oh," the rabbi said, clearly relieved. "But as the son of a rabbi, you should know that God is the same everywhere."

"Yes, Papa. I know that God is the same everywhere. *But I am not.*"

Where do you find God present? Jesus explained to Mary and Joseph, after they had found him back in Jerusalem, in the Temple; "I must be in my Father's house." Jesus knew the feeling of being in God's dwelling place, and not only the physical place. He filled the day, and then day after day, absorbed in teachings of the elders, asking questions, discussing the meaning of Scriptures, getting answers, feeling *the enormity of God* through the people he was with, through the shared studying the Torah.

Where is God's dwelling place for you? We do not have a Jerusalem Temple where we acknowledge God's earthly presence; but is there a role that this space holds, or sometimes one with stained glass and an organ, or sometimes a magnificent structure like Grace Cathedral, or a historical one like Gloucester Cathedral in England? What role does the physical place hold for you to sense God's presence? Our new prayer station offers that sense of God's presence to many people. I can tell through the lighted candles. Are there ways we can provide a better connection to God's presence through this place where we gather?

We do not make annual pilgrimages to the Jerusalem Temple, or to any central worship site, as our means of feeling God's presence. As Christians, we know that God is present through the connections you and I share as people who believe in, and try our best to reflect the life and values of Jesus Christ. I am not Christ, and you are not Christ. But in places that I cannot

meet that standard, you can. And in ways that you cannot live up to that standard, I can. And together, as the body of Christ, we can accomplish change and blessing that bring honor to God. Are there ways we can strengthen our connection with each other; are there things we should be doing that we are not doing now, that would better accomplish building a better dwelling place for God?

Like the boy who told his rabbi father that he knew God was the same everywhere, but he was not, I know that my coming to church holds me accountable to be more of what God wants me to be. My having friendships, sharing God's work through outreach, learning how to maintain relationships through good times and bad, whether rested or tired, whether things are going well or not going well, but being connected to a common purpose with you that is God-centered and not about protecting my own ego, raises the standard by which I want to live my life.

Jesus being 'lost' in the Jerusalem Temple reminds us of humanity's deeply rooted desire to find God's presence, and to be in God's presence. We Christians accept the gift in human history that God became one of us through the human birth of Jesus Christ. Through the reality of his mortal life with us, he has brought us into His presence.

In the dwelling place of God we feel hope where we might have lost hope; we acknowledge our own purpose and value where we may have lost sight of either; we recognize the reality of God's power in our life where without God we would be powerless.

Our responsibility is to make ourselves and our faith community, to the best of our ability, a suitable dwelling place for God. Let me know, and let your vestry know, if there are other means you want to see done here.

I pray that through the objectives we set personally and as a faith family, we will be blessed with the reward of living in God's abiding presence. Amen.