

(Un)settled  
2 Samuel 7:1–14a  
Sunday, July 18, 2021

Back at the end of May, we started a renovation on our kitchen at home. Which meant that, for about a month, we were a family of five without a fully functional kitchen. No cabinets, no countertops, no sink. We could still use our fridge and our stove, and our wonderful contractors left a sheet of plywood that we could use as a counter. So we could still make dinner each night. But I'd be in there cutting up chicken or vegetables or something, and I'd have to run in to use the sink in the laundry room to wash my hands and then run back because there was food on the burner. Then I'd have to go into the dining room, where we had moved everything that had been in the cabinets, to find a plate or a utensil or some seasoning. Everything was displaced. It was far from ideal, but it *worked*. We cooked dinner in there about five nights each week. It wasn't *easy*, but we were still able to do everything we needed to do. And once it was *done*, it felt *so good* to just get settled back in.

I don't think it's too much of a stretch to compare that to what we've just gone through as a church (and what some of us are *still* experiencing). We've talked plenty over the past year about how we have been *displaced*; unable to worship and live life together in the space that we normally share. We have had to find *other ways* to live life together as a church – outdoor services, virtual services and book studies and classes, virtual board meetings and congregational meetings, Staycation Bible School, online food drives, mailing in our offerings, drive thru ashes on Ash Wednesday. It was far from ideal, but it *worked*. It wasn't *easy*, but we were still able to do everything we needed to do. And once it was *done*, and we were able to be back here together, it has felt *so good* to get settled back in.

I've shared with some of you how, the first week that we were back in the sanctuary worshipping together, it felt like my very first week here. It felt like I was starting all over again. I didn't know where I needed to be or what I needed to be doing or when I needed to be doing it. I was totally out of sorts, and worship was so *big* that first Sunday, there was so much going on, and I came in here and didn't even have a *seat* because we had so many musicians up here! So for me, *last week* was the first time in 16 months that I have really felt *at home* (or dare I say *normal*) worshipping in the sanctuary. It was kind of like (deep breath), "Alright. There's *people* here, and we're getting into a rhythm again." I started to feel a little more *settled*.

I was struck by the *timing* of that – our coming back into the sanctuary for worship and this feeling of settling back in – with our lectionary reading this morning – particularly the first verse – which says that “the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him.” King David had been fighting battle after battle against King Saul and his family, the Amalekites, the Jebusites, the Philistines as he tried to establish his kingdom. It had been a very unsettled time in Israel, and now the fighting was finally *done*. David had defeated all of his enemies and was finally like (deep breath), “Now we can get into a more normal rhythm of life.”

And what he realizes right away is, “I've got this big, beautiful house that I'm living in, but the ark of God is just out in a *tent*.” So David gets the idea, “I need to build a *house* for *God*; a *temple*, a *sanctuary* where the ark can reside permanently and we can go to worship God.” When the people of Israel had left slavery in Egypt a couple of centuries earlier, they went out into the wilderness, God gave them God's law, and they built the ark, a container that held the tablets on which the law was written. The ark was said to be like the *footstool of God*, and wherever the ark went, the presence of God went with it.

As the people of Israel wandered through the wilderness, God's presence went with them in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Whenever they would stop to set up camp, they would set up a tent, a tabernacle where they would keep the ark. And it says that when they stopped and set up the tabernacle, the cloud would descend upon the tent and fill it with the glory, the spirit, the presence of God. Moses would go in there to talk with God, and the people would go to offer sacrifices. And then when the cloud went back up, they would pack up the tent and move on, and God's presence would go with them.

It went on this way for the 40 years that the Israelites were in the wilderness, and then for a couple of centuries after that. They would take the ark from place to place, and God's presence would go with them, but the ark would reside in this tent that moved around. For hundreds of years, it's like God was *displaced*. It was far from ideal, but it *worked*. It wasn't *easy*, but they were still able to do everything they needed to do. And now, *that* time in their life together is *done*, and they want to be *settled*. David wants to build a permanent home for the ark – a permanent home for *God* – a fixed place where God can *live*, and the people of Israel can go to *worship* God. Instead of God going *with them* wherever they go, David wants to create a place where God can *stay* and *they* can go to be with *God*.

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About nine years ago, I went to this place in Texas called Mo Ranch. It is a Presbyterian camp and conference center outside of San Antonio in the hill country, and I went there to speak at a weeklong conference for college students. All week, I heard those students talk about how much they loved that place; how much it *meant* to them. Some of them had been coming there since they were in junior high. They talked about how they needed to go there to refuel. They needed to go there to connect with God. So many people there told me how *that* was the place they had

always encountered and experienced God throughout their lives. Some of their most significant moments of spiritual growth had taken place *there*.

On the last morning of the conference, we worshipped outside in this open-air chapel that was built into the top of this big hill that looked out over the whole valley below. You could see for miles. It was *so beautiful*; one of those places where you just felt close to God. And after the conference ended, I kept touch with some of the students online, and so many of them would say things like, “I need to go back to Mo Ranch. I’m so busy right now. I’m so stressed. I need to feel God’s presence. I need to be with God.” It was like *that was their place* where they were with God, where they *connected* with God. It was a *holy* or a *sacred place* for them.

They kept using this phrase all week; they called it a “thin place.” It’s an old Celtic Christian term for the “rare places where the distance between heaven and earth collapses,” it becomes *thin*, and we feel closer to God. A lot of us have those places in our lives, right? Places where we connect with God and feel closer to God. Holy places, where the boundaries between heaven and earth becomes *thin*. The tabernacle was a thin place for the people of Israel. Maybe this sanctuary is a thin place for some of us. Or maybe you have somewhere else in your life where you just feel closer to God than anywhere else. And what King David wanted to do was capture that feeling *forever*. To make it *permanent*. He wanted to take this displaced God who had always been on the move and settle God down in a house.

But what God says to that is, “No. I didn’t ask you to do that. And actually, what I’m going to do is, I’m going to make *you* a house.” Now, there are a couple of ways to understand that. The first is that God is going to *make a house* for David and the people of Israel. God says right before this, “I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live

in their own place and be disturbed no more...and I will give you rest from all your enemies.” That God is going to create a *home* for the people of Israel, where they will be settled and safe. And that makes sense. If I told you that I was going to make you a house, you’d probably think *that* was what I meant; that I was going to build a home for you.

But there is another way to understand this, and that is that God is going to *turn them into a house*. That God is going to make David and the people of Israel into a dwelling place. It *sounds* strange, but *that* is what we actually see *happen*.

Eventually, David’s son King Solomon *does* build a temple for the Lord. And when he does, Solomon and the elders of Israel bring the ark into the newly finished temple. They place it in the innermost sanctuary, the most holy place in the temple. And when they *do* this, a cloud fills the entire Temple, just like it did out in the wilderness with the tabernacle. The glory, the spirit, the presence of God fills the temple, and the people of Israel said that was where God *lived*. God literally, physically *dwelled in the temple*.

So first, the cloud fills the tabernacle and the presence of God is *there*. Then, the cloud fills the temple, and the presence of God is *there*. But then several hundred years later, the temple is destroyed by the Babylonians and the people of Israel are sent away to live in exile. That was a traumatic moment for them. Because if God *lives* in the temple, and the temple is *destroyed*, then *where is God?* God is *displaced* again. Except this time, they feel like there is nowhere they can go to *be* with God. They don’t have an *ark* or a *tabernacle*. When they finally come back from exile, they rebuild the temple, and they wait for the cloud to fill it and for God’s presence to dwell there like had happened those other times. But it never does. God never

dwells in the second temple. So again, they are left with this question of, “If we can’t go there to be with God, then how is God present with us?”

What can happen is, we start to identify God’s presence so much with a particular place that we can start to *situate* God there. *Confine* God there. We can start to see that as the *only* place where we can experience God’s presence, so that *that* becomes the place we go to be with God, and when we *leave* that place, we leave God behind. Whether it’s a camp down in Texas or a sanctuary. When we come to *associate* God with a place, *any* place, and then we can’t *be* in that place, what happens to our connection with God? Do you feel *less* in the presence of God *at home* than you do *here*?

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Now, think about what *Jesus* did. He *walked*, he *travelled* with his disciples. He was constantly on the move, never staying in one place for very long. There are all these verses where Jesus says, “I am going *ahead of you*,” like the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire went *ahead* of the people of Israel on *their* journey. When Jesus rose from the dead, he was always saying, “I am going ahead of you to Galilee (or this other place). You will *find me* in *this place*. I will be *with you, always*.” It’s like Jesus is reminding us that we have a God who does not *sit still*. A God who does not stay in one place for very long. A God who is *living* and *active* and *constantly on the move*. A God who cannot be *confined* or *situated* to one place. A God who goes *with us, wherever we go*.

And Jesus says, “A time will come when you won’t *see me* anymore, but I will still be *with you*. God is sending the Holy Spirit to be God’s presence *with you* and *in you*.” And when the Holy Spirit came, it came in the form of *fire* and a *rushing wind*. Because *wind* doesn’t hold still. It moves and blows wherever it will. His disciples were all gathered together on Pentecost, when

all of a sudden wind and fire from heaven descended upon the room where they were, and the glory, the spirit, the presence of the Lord filled *them*. So we move from God's presence dwelling in a *tabernacle* to God's presence dwelling in a *temple* to God's presence dwelling in *people*. Paul picks up on this in his letters, saying, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."<sup>1</sup> "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit."<sup>2</sup> "We are the temple of the living God."<sup>3</sup> It's like God said to David, "I will make *you* a house," a dwelling place for the glory and the spirit and the presence of God.

You see, there are no "holy places." In Jesus Christ, heaven and earth *came together*. The boundary between them *disappeared*. In Jesus Christ, the divine and the human came together. The boundary between them disappeared. This world, our lives, it is all *saturated* with the presence of God. So there are no holy *places*. There are holy *people*. We are the tabernacles, the tents where God's presence dwells. We don't just *go to one place*, to a *special place* to be with God or encounter God or feel God's presence. God is present with us wherever we go. God is moving with us on each step of our journey. There is nowhere we can go that God is *not*, because God is *in us*. We are the tabernacles, the temples of the living God.

We just forget that sometimes, because it's easier to situate God in *one special place* than to constantly live with the reality and the *responsibility* that God is present with us – *in us* – everywhere we go. That everything we *do*, everything we *say* is a reflection of the glory and the spirit and the presence of God that dwells in us. I hope that one of the things this past year has shown us and really helped us *embody* is that we don't have to come *here* to be in the presence of

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:16

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:19

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:16

God. We have worshipped God and experienced the presence of God in our *homes*, in *parking lots*, in Zoom meetings. And I hope that as we move back in here and resume a more normal rhythm of life together, we don't do what David did, getting too settled and trying to settle God here. Because the church is so much more than a building. God is only present *here* because *we* are here and God is in *us*. Like we're going to sing in a moment, the *foundation* of the church, what this is all *built on*, is not cement and wood. It's *Jesus Christ*.

You, me, this world, we are all temples of the living God. You don't have to *go* anywhere. The glory and spirit and presence of God is *in you*. We just have to strive to *bear that* wherever we are.