

God Lives in the Congregation

1 Cor 6:13

August 27th, 2023

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
Do we not know that we are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in us?

We've been talking for several weeks about the places where Scripture says God lives, and what those places tell us about the character of God. I hope you are beginning to see that God's history with homes is bumpy. God is originally home-less. Our God comes from the wide-open, desolate spaces of the desert. God then comes to live with us in a humble tent after God frees us from pharaoh. When God finally moves into a "real" home—the Temple, that home is destroyed. Not once, but twice. I don't know if God had insurance—I guess God is God's own insurance.

One thing is true: we, as a people, were totally unprepared for the destruction of the house we built for God. I don't know how many of you have ever lost a home. But it is impossible for me to overstate how traumatic the destruction was to our ancestors. The Bible is a book literally created out of the trauma we experienced over the catastrophic loss of God's.

What happens to the promises of God when God's home lies in ruins? Where does God go when God has no home? Where do we find God, when the place we were sure God could be found is no longer there?

After the First Temple was destroyed in 587 BCE, we went into Exile for 3 generations. But those people held on to the dream of re-building God's house. That dream produces the most hopeful literature we ever read. Isaiah's extraordinary words "Comfort, Comfort my people"—it is a dream of hope and restoration—a dream echoed by Martin Luther King as he imagined a day of racial justice when "every valley will be raised up and every hill and mountain made low, and the rough places made plain and the glory of the Lord will appear and all flesh will see it together." That dream is the hope a people who want nothing more than to re-order their lives by building what was lost, by coming home again.

A Second Temple did rise up. God lived in that home for another 500 years. When the Romans ascended to power, they built God's house to its grandest scale ever. A magisterial building that could accommodate hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who came at Passover to praise God for freeing us from the hands of a tyrant. But in 70 CE, inspired by the God who frees God's people, the people revolted against Roman inhumanity. The Romans obliterated the Temple. The home for God has never been re-built.

Where did God go?

In the years after the destruction of the Second Temple, our ancestors created something even more magnificent. They created a new home for God. Larger than the one before. More durable than the one before. Built out of sturdier material than the one before. A home for God so powerful, that no empire could *ever* destroy it. What was this new home for God?

(IMAGE of NDPC)

God lives in the “congregation.” The Greek word is “synagogue.” An assembly. The gathering. God lives here. It is one of the most extraordinary theological innovations in human history. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote,

The emergence of the synagogue is an example of an “an awakening from below.” It comes into being not through words spoken by God to the people, but by words spoken by the people to God. There is no synagogue in the Hebrew Scriptures, no command to build local houses of prayer.¹

But build them our ancestors did. Without a central place to worship, the people came to understand that the holiness of God could be found wherever a congregation assembled. At any time and in any place. Wherever we find each other, and *turn our hearts together towards God*, there God can be found.

God is here. It’s an astoundingly bold idea to pivot from “God lives in the Holy of Holies” to God lives in

- IMAGE: Grace Lutheran of Apple Valley
- IMAGE: Lithonia
- IMAGE: Lalibela, Ethiopia

Now, to be fair, the idea that God would be at home with us wherever we are was not new. Those of you who have been here for a few weeks will surely see how this move for God, is, at its heart, a return to the Tent. A return to the humble, portable home that our ancestors made by hand with such love and care.

The instructions for the Tabernacle, which we read two weeks ago, hold within them a funny, curious line. It’s Exodus 25:8. At the beginning of that long, tedious list of cloth colors and spans, God says, “They shall make me Sanctuary, and I will dwell in them.” By all rights, this line should read “in it.” As in, “make me a sanctuary and I will dwell in it.” But that’s not what the line says. It says, “I will dwell in *them*.” Rabbi Sacks writes:

the Divine Presence lives not in a building *but in its builders*; not in a physical place *but in the human heart*. A Sanctuary is not a place in which the existence of God is somehow more concentrated than in other places. A sanctuary is any place that has the effect of opening hearts to the One worshipped there.

It’s true, Rabbi Sacks says, that

¹ <https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/terumah/a-portable-home/>

God exists everywhere, but we don't feel the presence of God everywhere in the same way. The essence of "a holy place" is that in that place we set aside all human desires and we enter a domain wholly set aside for God.

We enter a domain wholly set aside for God. That, whether you knew it or not, is what you walked into this morning.

This idea that God was wherever people turn their hearts together toward God was already in Judaism, when the apostle Paul took it ran with it and wrote to the Corinthians, "*Do you not know, people of Corinth, that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?*" The "you" here is the plural you, as in "y'all." Do y'all not know, people of North Decatur, that y'all are God's temple, and God's Spirit dwells in all y'all?

So... where is She? Where is God? If God is here, shouldn't we be able to see her? Everyone look under your pew. Is God there?

God is here in the mysterious alchemy that happens when you come into this place and your heart is open to God and to each other. We that happens we all become aware, in a new way, of the Oneness that is at the heart of all things. When our hearts are open together, we can perceive the Great Love that is all around and under and in all things: the Great Love that created this world, the Great Love that calls us to be a People, the Great Love that freed us from slavery and frees us still so that we can love each other. When are hearts are open together, we perceive the Great Love that walked among us as a human named Jesus, full of grace and truth, the Great Love that rose from the dead and said "Peace." When our hearts are open at the same time in the same place, we know the Great Love which meets us in the breaking of the bread and names us in the waters of baptism and calls us to serve each other and wash each others' feet. When our hearts are open together, the Great Love is here.

I hope I'm not bursting any bubbles when I admit to you that while I find the language of God being alive here in the congregation, I for one do not feel God's presence every Sunday. Some Sundays I am bored by the sermon—which is even sadder because I wrote it. Some Sundays the anthem falls flat for me. Some Sundays we forget to pray for something or we will pray for the wrong thing and it doesn't work for me. Sometimes everything goes right in worship and I still can perceive God... because life is hard and sometimes grumpy just happens.

There's no formula to make God show up in our worship. Oh, how we all wish there were. There's no magic in praise songs or hymns or long sermons or short ones. There's no system that humans have ever created that can make the Great Love show up in such a way that those people go out into the world to live that Great Love in all of our relationships.

IMAGE: Kroger

Sometimes, even when we show up with open hearts, the Great Love is nowhere to be found. Sometimes the Great Love has left the building entirely, and when that happens, it's time for

that congregation to close. Beth's mentor, Rev. Becca Stevens, an extraordinary Episcopal priest, tells a story about visiting the site of the church where she had grown up as a girl and finding that it had closed and the steeple had been torn down and it had been turned into a Kroger. Instead of feeling sad, she found herself grateful. That congregation had been the site of great pain in her life. And as she watched all kinds of diverse people coming in and out of the grocery store, she thanked God that finally, in that place, people were actually being fed the bread of life.

IMAGE: Skate Park

Sometimes churches close. Sometimes churches of a very different sort rise out of those same spaces. Lee Nichols sent me this beautiful story from last week's paper about a long-defunct church in St. Louis that was, turned into a skate park. The community of skaters—long vilified and treated as outcasts—made this old church in a beautiful new source of love and community.

IMAGE: Arlington

My friend Ashley Goff is the pastor of Arlington Presbyterian Church in Virginia. For years, they had been worshiping in an older building with a sturdy but smallish congregation. And they watched housing prices in their community go up and up. And the people who had always called Arlington home were priced out. And they looked at their church building and their nice piece of property on a choice Arlington street and they said, "we should make the housing." And they did. They sold their church building to a developer and they tore the church down and now it is affordable housing, and the church did this on one condition: that in that new affordable housing development, there be a community room, and on Sunday mornings that community room would be reserved for the congregation of Arlington Presbyterian Church.

It's true that some Sundays, I don't feel the Great Love in worship. But I also know that Sunday isn't the only day when the Great Love shows up here.

I've seen the Great Love on a weeknight when mentors would gather new mothers to help them learn how to breastfeed their new babies.

I've seen the Great Love on a summer day when kids are learning to love science and laughing together over an experiment at camp.

I've seen the Great Love between friends weeding the garden and in the sharing of stories and laughter over the click-clack of knitting needles.

I've seen the Great Love helping people get and stay sober here almost every night of the week.

I've seen the Great Love standing outside the refrigerator and holding a peace vigil on Scott Boulevard.

And the truth is, I do, quite often, feel the Great Love here, in this space. Rabbi Sacks says, "The essence of "the holy" is that it is a place where we set aside all human devices and desires and enter a domain wholly set aside for God." It's not just that God has decided to meet us here—

it's that we decide to meet God, too. Your expectation—that you bring with you every Sunday—that something just might happen here—that something here might just change your life—that the Great Love just might sit on your shoulder—your expectation is the key ingredient.

North Decatur Presbyterian Church has been here since 1955. There may come a day when the fire here goes out, when the Spirit has left the building. And this place will close. And they may tear it down, and developers will build something else—probably not a Kroger cause there are too many grocery stores here already.

I don't worry one bit. Because the Great Love never goes away. Not really. God is not in the building, but the builders. Those who seek the Great Love will always find her at home with them.

You should know it by now: you are God's temple, and God's Spirit lives in you.