

Where'd God Go?

The first Gospel reading this morning is the prologue of the gospel according to John.

[John 1:1-5, 10-14]

This is the story. It gets repeated over and over throughout both the Old and New Testaments.

It's the story of God drawing near, and of people not noticing.

It's the story of God doing what God does as he enters our lives anyway.

Listen for these same themes in today's passage from the second chapter of Luke.

[Luke 2:41-52]

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer.*

Have you ever thought much about worship spaces?

They take many forms and I certainly have my own preferences.

At Saint John's where I went to school,

there are two buildings standing fairly close to one another.

One is the Abbey Church

the other is called the Great Hall, otherwise known as the Old Church.

It is always fun taking people on this part of the tour.

You always bring them to the new Abbey Church first and try to explain how it has a sort of beauty to it even though all most people, myself included, see only a large concrete box with a sort of stylized concrete goalpost - you know, because the Holy Spirit is like the spirit of football games.

(They take football very seriously there).

Once our guests are thoroughly underwhelmed,

you bring them into the old church, through these massive doors

that look like they belong to a castle or fortress into this

space where the light is filtered through stained glass

windows depicting prophets and apostles and the like.

And staring down at you is a giant *Pantokrator* - the almighty or all-powerful in English, the name for this style of icon showing Christ holding up a hand in blessing while holding the book of life.

It's kind of awe-inspiring.

You know you've entered into a sacred space.

For Jesus, the most awe-inspiring obviously holy places was the Temple in Jerusalem. It was an impressive place, where God's presence was said to dwell. And observant Jews as he and his earthly family were, he would go, probably three times a year to this holy place.



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For there are three yearly festivals that called for a trip to Jerusalem these are laid out in the book of Exodus 23:13

“Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me...

1. Passover (Unleavened Bread) (Spring)
2. Pentecost (First fruits) (50 days after Passover)
3. Booths/Tabernacles (Ingathering) (September, October)

Jesus' parents participated liturgically in these festivals, and Luke tells us this morning about how as a child, his parents took him along for these festivals.

The Passover festival it was, and so Mary, Joseph, and going to a Holy place, going to meet God in the Temple as was commanded in Exodus and again in Leviticus.

But going to the Temple isn't a casual undertaking. It's a pilgrimage to a holy site, a journey to stand in the presence of the Holy One of Israel.

One way in which they would have impressed upon themselves that this was a sacred journey was to approach the Temple singing the Psalms of Ascent. There are fifteen of these, 120-134 according to our numbering. We heard one read for us this morning.

Psalm 132 tells of David's desire to build a Temple for God.

A Temple that had permanence, power, grandeur, such things as reflect the attributes of God, and give glory to Him.

It was to be a special place where God's presence would be especially felt, where it would be said God would dwell.



God already dwelled with his people as they wandered through the wilderness looking for their promised land - his glory was concentrated around a tent, they called it a tabernacle.

This holy tabernacle provided a place to go to meet God, and to welcome and acknowledge his continuing presence and guidance. but it was just a tent:

it was movable, temporary,

it had to seem unbearably embarrassingly pathetic next to David's royal palace.

David, for all his flaws, is remembered as a man after God's own heart.

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He wanted to correct this imbalance and give God a mighty palace.
But God himself never asked for a building to live in.
God doesn't live in a building.

Now, some people would like God to live in a building.
A nice palace, preferably at a distance.
After all, His majesty needs to be protected
 lest he be contaminated by coming too close to icky, sinful humanity.
Or that is the theological excuse that sounds better
 than admitting that we don't want Him getting too close.
He may start messing with our lives,
 showing us things about ourselves we'd rather not acknowledge,
 and asking of us things we'd rather not do.
God's scary. Solution: let's build him a palace so he'll leave us alone.
We can go to the palace and offer sacrifices such as will appease him,
so again, he might leave us alone.
At least, that is how some more problematic developments in theology reasoned.
Complete misunderstandings,
but understandable ones when you think God is so transcendent
 that he can only come to us in a hermetically sealed container.

But that's not how God works.
God is the one in whom we live, move and have our being.
He is above all and through all and in all.
(He is the one who is everywhere present and fills all things).
To make it inescapably clear that God can do as He pleases
 and that he pleases to be present with us,
 he entered our humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.
In other words, Christmas.

God seems to have liked his Tabernacle tent though, where he could dwell in the midst of his people, and even commanded that for eight days after the harvest the Israelite people were to live in tents. Some Orthodox Jews keep up this practice, and set up temporary huts that they live in during the festival of the booths.
But this does not mean that David's intentions were wrong.
We can understand his desire, and more than that we can embrace that impulse as people have done for thousands of years as this psalm is prayed again and again, by those on pilgrimage, but also by anyone who prays the Psalms as millions of Christians and Jews

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still do every day. Generally it is given a more spiritualized meaning, more of a Lord, I want there to be a space within myself for you, I want my heart to be your altar, a suitable place for you to dwell in me. That along with a love for worship and prayer, pointing towards a yearning for God's closeness. You know the song "Lord prepare me to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true, with thanksgiving, we'll be a living, sanctuary for you" - (I'm not as brave as Kate so I'm not singing it for you) but that's the idea. But God did allow that David's son might build a Temple, and that another one be built when the first one was destroyed. And whatever the drawbacks of this sort of permanent residence for God might be, it does have its benefits. It is a physical theological statement that God is here and not only far off in heaven. It says that people *can* come to meet God. By having only one central Temple, it also emphasizes that there is but One God. There's also an interesting psychological side for the worshipper.

Having a physical location to go to to meet God gives you agency and options. It gives you the chance to *choose* to go to God.

God is everywhere present, and can find us wherever we may be.

It is a different thing entirely to seek God.

By going out of your way, you take ownership of your decisions,
because it is no longer something you do just by default.

This is important for today's story about the 12 year old in the Temple.

He's twelve,

and as such may not have had a whole lot of say in going on this pilgrimage.

And yet, he's twelve, and he is starting to make his faith his own.

When the festival ended, Luke tells us, Jesus stayed (he wasn't lost, the text clearly says that he stays)- a choice he made on his own. He clearly didn't ask permission because his parents didn't know about this decision.

It seems he liked it at the Temple. He felt that was where he belonged.

As he tells Mary "Why were you searching for me?"

Didn't you know I must be in my Father's house?"

Mary and Joseph may not come off the best here, though we can excuse them for losing Christ Child, after all it was far more a "it takes a village" type culture than today's where helicopter parenting is more prevalent.

They had to search for him for three days - but of course they did, it's symbolic and the way Luke writes often includes this type of foreshadowing.

But it also brings to light the truth that those who were closest to Jesus, those who knew him the best, didn't realize that he'd be in the Temple.

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Sometimes we miss what's right in front of us through our over-familiarity with it.

As I read in the gospel of John:

“He was in the world and the world came to being through him, but the world did not know Him. He came to his own, and his own did not receive Him.”

That doesn't stop Him from being there, unknown and unrecognized.

The Temple was where he was supposed to be.

And not just the Temple, but in the midst of the teachers.

In the midst of those talking about God.

That is where he tends to show up, in the midst of his people.

“Where two or more are gathered in his name, there am I with them,” Jesus promises in the Gospel of Matthew.

Or again in the Prologue of John:

“And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.”

He doesn't just dwell, the Greek word is ἐσκήνωσεν - he tabernacled.

He pitched his tent among us. In the midst of us.

Waiting to be sought out, and received,
so that he might make us children of God.

And so, as King David so desired to do,

we can build a Temple,

carving out a place for the divine in our lives,

even if it isn't a grand palace,

he never minded a tent, nor the manger.

We can find a way to welcome Him and receive Him.

By finding a space, a moment of stillness,

listening with the ears of our heart, and inviting Him to enter.

Preparing a lamp there for Christ.

So He may sanctify our very lives.

*Now to the One, who by the power at work within us,
is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever.*

Amen.