

“A House of God”

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
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New Testament Lesson: Matthew 12:3-8

Old Testament Lesson: 1 Kings 8:22-23, 27-30, 41-43

The late Rev. Carl B. Rife told about a young person returning from Sunday school who sat by a man at a bus stop one day. The man, apparently an unbeliever, saw her Sunday school paper and decided to make fun of her. “Tell me where God is and I’ll give you an apple.” To which the little girl replied, “Sir, you tell me a place where God isn’t, and I’ll give you a basket of apples.” That little girl had the wisdom of Solomon. King Solomon also knew that there is no place God cannot be found, and that God’s majesty is greater than we can ever know or perceive.

Solomon’s great prayer in our Old Testament lesson for today is a wonderful overview of God’s majesty. Standing at the altar of the LORD God Almighty in the presence of all the people, Solomon spreads out his hands to heaven and says, “O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath....”

That’s the first attribute of God in Solomon’s prayer. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.” Does anyone recognize that prayer? – “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.” That prayer is called the Shema. According to the website Hebrew for Christians, whenever the Shema is prayed aloud in the synagogue, Orthodox Jews pronounce each word very carefully and cover their eyes with their right hand. Many Jews recite the Shema at least twice a day. Follow along in your bulletins, on Page 4, where it says “sermon note.” Can you imagine praying that twice a day: Shema (hear), Yis-ra-el (Israel), Adonai (the Lord), e-lo-hey-nu (our God), Adonai e-chad (one Lord). Hear, O Israel – O people of God – the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.

What else do we know about God, the one and only God, the Lord God Almighty? And what should be our response to such a great God?

King Solomon points out 10 different attributes of God in his great prayer. In addition to saying “there is no (other) God in heaven or on earth” Solomon says of God, quote, “Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!”

There is no other God, and God cannot be contained or boxed in! The third attribute Solomon points to is that God is ever vigilant. God is always looking after us; God sees all. Or as Solomon says in his great prayer, “(Heed) the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; that your eyes may be open night and day. God hears our prayers.

And not only does God hear our prayers, but God is with us. God has chosen to dwell among us. That's the fifth attribute Solomon points to, when he prays about the Temple he has built, calling it "the place," quote, "of which (God) said, 'My name shall be there.'"

God promises that even though there is just one God in all the world, even though God's vastness cannot be contained, even though God pays attention to all corners of the globe, God still promises to be with us, always. Wherever you are, says God, "my name" – my presence, my power – "shall be there" with you. It's kind of like the Sunday school teacher who asked her preschoolers where God is. Steven raised his hand and said, "He's in heaven." Mary was called on and answered, "He's in my heart." Little Johnny, waving his hand furiously, blurted out, "I know, I know! He's in our bathroom!!!"

The whole class got very quiet, looked at the teacher, and waited for her response. After a few very long seconds, the teacher finally asked Little Johnny how he knew this. Johnny said, "Well ... every morning, my father gets up, bangs on the bathroom door, and yells, "Good Lord, are you still in there?!"

Turns out that God really is everywhere, even the inner sanctum of our homes, so to speak. So the question is, if God is found everywhere in heaven and on earth – even in the center of your house – is God also at the center of your life? And if not, why not?

I mean look at the next four attributes of God pointed to by Solomon. Solomon prays to God, saying, "... Hear in heaven your dwelling-place (the plea of your people); heed and forgive." Not only is God always with us, but God pays attention to us, and God forgives us, forgives any and all of our misdeeds and misguided ways. A God who hears us and forgives us is a good God indeed; a God to draw close to, to bring into the center of our lives.

Now here comes the scary part. God is not only our God, but the God of all people. Solomon prays to God saying, "Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name ... 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 all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel"

We have reason to fear God because God cannot be contained, because God does choose to be among us and doesn't leave us alone, because God hears us and is always with us and because God forgives not only us, but God hears and forgives all people – even people who are foreign to us, if they come before God in righteousness and humility. Who in your life or in this world do you consider foreign to you? Does God hear their prayers, forgive their misdeeds? Do you listen to them and forgive them – those who are different from you?

The majesty of God is such that God is universal, and that includes God's forgiveness and graciousness. These are not for us alone, but for all people. And because God is the God of all people – forgiving and gracious to all – then we, too, can and should be forgiving and gracious to all people.

This brings us to the last two attributes of God. God is inspiring and God is glorified. God inspires us to be better than we know ourselves to be, and in that, we glorify God.

As Solomon says in his prayer, the foreigner “shall hear of your great name, (O God), your mighty hand, your outstretched arm ... 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... (glorified).” God is inspiring and God is glorified.

This, my friends, is the God of ancient Israel, the God of Christianity, the God of all people the world over, in every time and place. The Lord is our God; the Lord is one.

God cannot be contained, God sees all and is always with us, God hears us and pays attention to us, God forgives us and all people, God inspires us to be better than we know ourselves to be, and in that, we are called to glorify God in all that we do.

When you are challenged to respond to any struggle you are having, respond to it as God responds to you – with graciousness and forgiveness, knowing that in that, God is with you. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

God, remind us today of the hope that we have in you. Help us to remember your goodness and faithfulness.

You have never abandoned us; you have never left our side.

Even when we turn away or dash off in the other direction, you're always here – waiting for us to come home to you.

Because of you, we have hope for this life. We have hope that our work can be meaningful, that our relationships can be healthy, that the earth will one day be fully restored.

We live in that hope because you have saved us. Help us never to lose hope as we continually remember all the blessing of life, blessings reflected so well in the prayer that we now lift up to you in song:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**