

Sermon: Finding God
1 Kings 8:1-11, 22-30, 41-43
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Where can we find God? Where does he “live”? And how can we, human beings, be close to him, to enjoy his presence and support?

For the biblical nation of Israel this was a crucial question; for the church and for us as Christians this is a crucial question; for most religions this is the heart of the matter.

We need God; we need him on our side, not against us. We desire to be close to him as he is our creator and our Father.

1. Where can we find God?

We have read about the building of the temple of Solomon, from the book of 1 Kings. Finally Israel had a fantastic temple - a house for God. *‘Now we know where God lives, where we can find him, how we can serve him’*, Israel thought.

But wait! Let us first take a few moments to think about the writer of the books of 1 Kings and 2 Kings. These two books were originally one, and if you look at the end of the books, you see when these books were written.

They were written shortly after Israel had been taken to Babylon in captivity, and their glorious temple in Jerusalem had been totally destroyed.

‘So where is God now? His temple - his house - is destroyed. And we, His people have been scattered!’

When we have bad things that happen to us, we may ask the same question. Where is God when we need him most?

The original temple had been such a blessing for Israel; it had been the summit of their religious and their national life, at a time when economically they were also doing very well.

We have read how - when the temple of Solomon was finished - the whole tabernacle with its contents was brought into the temple. The tabernacle that God commanded Israel to create just after they had left Egypt, at their most glorious time in the history of the nation.

God had been with the people in the desert; he had helped them; he blessed them. The tabernacle reminded Israel of this, and now they had, as it were, a much better tabernacle. A permanent temple.

When the temple was opened, Solomon made it into a great feast of sacrifices - so many sheep and cattle were sacrificed, impossible to count. Meeting with God was impossible without sacrifice upon sacrifice...

The priests brought the Ark of the Covenant from the tabernacle into its permanent abode in the temple, into the Most Holy Place.

In the Ark were the two stone tablets with the Ten Commandments, reminding Israel of God's covenant with them. If they would only obey God and follow his commands, he promised to be with them.

And when the Ark was placed in the Most Holy Place of the new temple, and the priests then withdrew from that cubicle, 'the cloud filled the temple of the Lord; the glory of the Lord filled his temple.'

God was in their midst; he lived between his people.

Well, that is all nice - good history - but how could this help the people of God after their temple was destroyed and after they were scattered and taken to Babylon?

For those people in need, feeling depressed, feeling that God is far away, it is important to listen carefully to Solomon's prayer at the inauguration of the Temple.

Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel and spread out his hands toward heaven, and said, "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath. [...] But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O Lord my God [...] that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, 'My name shall be there,' [...] And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place.

Even when the glorious temple was opened, Solomon recognised that the building was not the real resting place of God, after all. Even heaven cannot contain God - how could a house build of stone contain God?

For Israel, scattered over the earth, this was good news. God can be found anywhere, even in Babylon. Even though the temple is gone, God still fills heaven and earth with his presence.

Now this statement, God is everywhere, does not mean that God does not connect himself, for our sake, with special places or events. Solomon did not deny that the Temple was very special. That is where God could be especially found. That is also where animal sacrifices had to be brought for reconciliation between God and the people. There, and nowhere else.

If people say, '*I do not need church, I can find God in nature*', they create a wrong contradiction. Surely, God can be found in the beauty of nature. That helps us to come closer to him.

But God has also decided that He can in a much deeper way, in a more meaningful way, be found in special places and events. And he has ordained that we find him especially when we commemorate the great sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

But for a person who has lost his Temple - or for instance for the Christians whose churches were destroyed in upper Egypt two years ago, it is comforting to know, whatever happens - God fills the earth and we can find him wherever we are.

People may destroys our building, our bibles, our lives - but God is with us as He surrounds us. This is great encouragement - - - but *not* an excuse to not seek him where he tells us he wants to be found *specifically*.

2. People of God

Solomon also prayed another important prayer for the Israelites who lost their temple and who now lived in between the nations.

Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for your name's sake (for they shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name

and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name.

That is an amazing prayer; when Israel was at the height of its power, both religiously and politically, Solomon asked God for what?

He asked God that he would treat Israelites and foreigners totally equal. 'Listen to us, God, and listen likewise to them'.

... do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel.

The temple of God was supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations. Israel was not blessed for its own sake, but for the sake of the world. God wants to be known in all the earth.

So the Israelites in the diaspora, in Babylon, Rome, Egypt, could know that God was not far from them, but also that he had given them a task to make his name known among the nations.

This was Abraham's calling - *'I will make you a blessing for the nations.'* It was also Israel's calling. To make God known among the nations.

So where can the world, where can we find God? Where is God when we need him most?

When Jesus spoke with a non-Jewish woman, a Samaritan woman, she asked him about the Jewish temple - rebuild after its first destruction. Is that Temple the place where we have to pray - where we can find God? or can we find him in our own Samaritan temple, in our own way, on our own mountain?

Do all ways lead to Rome?

3. Jesus

What did Jesus answer?

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is

coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. [...] The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

This was a crucial moment. Jesus underlines that Jewish worship was the right worship, that is where God could be found.

It is not true that we can find God in any religion, that all roads lead to Rome. What we teach about God matters, and how we worship matters.

But Jesus also clarified that soon, this Jewish worship in the temple, would no longer be relevant for those who want to find God.

And the most important thing: Jesus is the Messiah - He is the hinge of history.

The Temple in the time of Jesus was also to be destroyed, no doubt as punishment for the nation of Israel, if you believe what Jesus said about this in the Gospel stories.

But the end of that Temple was also a meaningful symbol. Because Jesus presented himself to the people as the ultimate Temple of God, the temple of stone was no longer needed. We discussed this before summer in our Bible studies.

God is everywhere - but if we want to find God, where is He when we need him most? Jesus is the best place to look for God. He is the Temple in person.

He is the one who - in his person - reconciled man to God by being the eternal - once-for-all sacrifice. And he draws all people to himself - Jews and others.

And we as church are also called a Temple in the New Testament - because we are part of Jesus Christ. God is everywhere, but he is particularly present in Jesus Christ who is present in the community of his people. In our midst. That is where he promised to be, when only 2 or 3 are together in his name.

And as a temple, our role is not unlike the temple of Solomon - we are to be the place where others find God. Even people who are very different from us. And we are to be the place where people are reconciled to God. And we have a mission to make the name of God known all around us.

Conclusion

If we need God, we come to the place where he can be found best. Yes, He inhabits the universe - but he is best found in his Temple, our community of Christians.

And our community is strongest, most intense, when we together as one people, commemorate the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and if together we participate in that sacrifice.

So if like the people of Israel in Babylon, you feel you are far from God and that you lost hope - then take communion to let God be closer to you than at any other moment.

While kneeling, take your time to thank God - that he can be found - that he never lets go of you. That He is ever present.

And let communion strengthen you, to let your light shine around you. We are tasked by God to invite the people we know to come and find God in our midst.

So invite your friends, family, colleagues, to come to church, to listen to God's Word, to participate in our community and in our communion - so that more people find God.

Amen