

“Listen God”
1 Kings 8: 1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43

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CCUMC

Melanie Dobson Hughes

I. Introduction (before scripture reading) --A Covenant Journey

What a journey we have been on this summer! We started in June with the prophet Samuel and the people of Israel clamoring for a king. We learned of the first King Saul’s failures, and of the young shepherd boy David’s anointing by Samuel. We cheered as David defeated Goliath, and cried as he lamented the deaths of his best friend Jonathan and of King Saul. We rejoiced as we heard God promise to be with David and the people of Israel for always—making a new covenant with David and the line to follow after him. Our hearts sank as David committed adultery and murder. We lamented as David made his confession to God of his wrongdoing—and as his son Absalom continued his father’s legacy of violence. Last week, we observed the new King Solomon as he requested wisdom. Now, on this last Sunday of this summer long series, we will celebrate with Israel as Solomon dedicates the Temple.

This temple, which took over seven years to build, was built of cedar, inlaid with gold in the interior, decorated with cherubim, palm trees, and flowers. It was gorgeous. Solomon was blessed by God to build it, rather than his father David (2 Samuel 7). Now, during the Feast of Tabernacles, a late fall feast that celebrated God’s covenant with Moses on Mt. Sinai with tens of thousands gathered, Solomon dedicates the temple with prayer. The main portion of the text today is comprised of Solomon’s prayer over this grand, new temple. Hear the reading of God’s word.

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II. Where Is God?

Solomon's prayer reaches out to answer two key questions for the people gathered, shielding their eyes from the brilliance of the new temple. The first is, "Where is God?" The second is "Will God listen to us?" We'll deal with the first question first—"Where is God?"

Solomon, perhaps better than his father could have done, states clearly where God is not. He prays, "Will God indeed dwell on earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" Solomon understands that even as he stands in front of a magnificent edifice for worship, God isn't contained there. God remains unfettered holiness. God remains transcendent above heaven and earth. God's freedom transcends any building made by human hands. God doesn't stay put on an altar for human beings' convenience.

So if God is not in the temple, as Solomon clarifies, why bother building a temple? Well. . . the temple is a place where God's presence can be made known. The sanctuary of the temple was to help Israelites as a community to know that God does exist. The temple was a concrete reminder of God's presence with them.¹

We have a description in our text today of a cloud filling the temple. This cloud was a visible manifestation of the glory of the Lord; it symbolized God's presence there in the temple. This cloud is the same kind of cloud that lead the Israelites out of Egypt; this cloud hovered upon them during the Exodus and wilderness wanderings. This same cloud descended upon Mt. Sinai during the giving of the Ten Commandments.² Now, this cloud in the temple that Solomon built reminds Israel of God's history of presence with and to them for over five hundred years. The cloud (known as the theophanic cloud) conveys

¹ Choon Leong Seow, "1-2 Kings", *NIBC* (Abingdon: Nashville, 1999).

² Kathryn Schifferdecker, workingpreacher.org Accessed on August 20, 2012.

God's presence without indicating confinement. The cloud symbolizes that God is with the people, but is also free from the people's building.

Then, if people can know God's presence in the temple, but God isn't confined there, the people of Israel and us are still left with the question, "Where is God?" Where is God if God isn't contained in the ark of the covenant or the Holiest of Holies in the temple or even in a glorious cloud? How are the people of Israel supposed to know where the God they follow is?

Solomon attempts to answer this question in the beginning part of his prayer. "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David." To the people of Israel, Solomon says, God is, God can be found in the relationship God has with us. God is found in the enduring covenant God has kept with us. The first covenant on Mt. Sinai of the law God continues to keep. The second covenant God made with David God continues to keep.³ God keeps promises and keeps Israel.⁴ God is faithful and merciful, no matter how the people (or the kings) mess up. Where is God? God, the transcendent One, is known in relationship.

We Christians, who are graciously engrafted into the people of Israel, know God in relationship as well. For us, we know too that a temple can't contain God. However, we believe that Jesus is the presence of God "fleshed out." The tabernacle came to dwell among us and the glory of God is present in him (John 1: 14, John 2: 19-22). The living presence of God is made known in the salvific acts of Christ---not in any temple or

³ Ibid.

⁴ Cameron Howard, workingpreacher.org Accessed on August 20, 2012. Elizabeth Achtemier, *Preaching and Reading the Old Testament Lection with an eye to the new*.

institution, or church building. Jesus Christ is the consummation of God's covenant with humanity---and it is through Jesus that we are able to have relationship with God. Solomon answered the question "where is God?" with the answer---in our covenanted relationship with God. Christians can answer the question "where is God?" with the answer---in our covenanted relationship with God incarnated in Jesus.

Perhaps some of you come to church, to this building wondering "where is God?" Can I find God here (look under the altar)? The truth is that God isn't contained in this building (though this building is containing a lot less stuff now!). We come here, to this sanctuary (narthex, nave, and chancel) not because God lives here, but because we are reminded of God's ongoing covenant with us. We come here to be a community that affirms God is with us in Christ. We come here because this church building is a concrete symbol of God's ongoing faithfulness and mercy. Perhaps some of you wish that you could touch God, could see a theophanic cloud of holiness fill this space. Instead, we are left with one another. If you are really doubting where God is in your life, hope that the person standing beside you can sing "Great is Thy Faithfulness" for you. We come to this building because in community we flesh out God's mercy and presence to each other.

III. Will God Listen to Us?

Perhaps some of you come here wondering the second question (maybe even in addition to "where is God?"). You are wondering if God will listen to your heart-cries. You are wondering "does God listen to me?"

Recently I had a conversation with someone who wondered if God listened to her prayers. Her husband had just died from a heart defect in his forties. She is now left with a two-year old daughter to raise by herself, and a huge grief. She was wondering to me if God listened to her intercessions, to her desperate prayers for her husband's life. Does God

listen when I pray, she wondered. It doesn't seem like my prayers did anything, she said. My husband still died. Does God even listen to my prayers?

She, and perhaps you as well, are joining the throngs of thousands gathered at the new Temple in Jerusalem who are wondering the same thing. Does God listen to us? Is it even worth praying in this new temple? Will God hear our prayers in this new place, in this new life?

King Solomon, who is actually very pastoral in this prayer, anticipates what his people are thinking. He asks that God would listen. He prays, "Listen to the requests of you servant and your people Israel when they pray toward the Temple. Listen from your heavenly dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive!" Solomon asks that God would continue faithfulness to the covenant by hearing the prayers that will be made in this new temple. Solomon prays that God show mercy and listen to the heart cries of God's people. The king prays that God will hear and will respond to the prayers of human need. Then, as he stands up from the altar where he has been kneeling with hands held high, he trusts that God will hear, that God will be with them, just as God was with Israel's ancestors. Solomon trusts that God will bless and uphold promises.

Solomon even prays that God would hear the prayers of immigrants and foreigners. The king prays that God will do what the immigrant asks, so that God might be praised by all the people of the earth. In this prayer for the immigrant, Solomon is including us. Though we may not be Jews, though we may not dwell on the land of Israel, we are included as ones worthy of being heard by God. We are welcomed as Gentiles into the worship of the God of Israel.

So to any of you who are wondering if God listens to your prayers, Solomon's prayer says a resounding "yes." Through whatever plague or sickness, through whatever sin or

sorrow, God will listen and God will forgive. God will hear our prayers—from the temple that day in Jerusalem to our church on 2nd Street in Carbondale. Solomon’s prayer today assures us that God does listen.

When we pray, trusting that God hears our petitions, what changes might not be our outward situation. Perhaps the Jews who built that Temple as slaves remained slaves even after their prayers for freedom at the Temple’s completion. Maybe husbands who die too early and leave behind young daughters stay dead. When we pray, knowing that God listens, what happens is that we change. Held in the cloud of God’s presence, we as pray-ers can become more loving, more faithful, more like God. When we know that God listens and is present to us, we can become people who are merciful in the face of sorrow.

“Lord my God, listen to your servant’s prayer and request, and hear the cry and prayer that your servant prays to you today.” May we indeed trust that God does hear us. May we indeed trust that God is with us in covenant relationship. In the name of a God who is present and who hears. . . Amen

Let us pray: