

Proper 16 B Sermon
1 Kings 8, selections
August 22, 2021

“A New House”
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Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion. ⁶Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. ¹⁰And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, ¹¹so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.

²²Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. ²³He said, “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” . . . ⁴¹“Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name ⁴²—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, ⁴³then 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, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.”

One morning as Professor Thompson was leaving for the college his wife told her absent-minded husband, “Don't forget we are moving today. If you come to this house this afternoon it will be empty.” Predictably he didn't remember until he found the house vacated that afternoon. He mumbled to himself, “And where was it we were moving to?” He went out in front of the house and asked a little girl, “Did you see a moving van here today, little girl?” “Yes,” she replied. “Can you tell me which way it went?” She looked up at him and said, “Yes, Daddy, I'll show you.”¹

While I've never forgotten moving day on the day of, I can certainly relate to Professor Thompson's absent-minded bewilderment on the big day. Nothing is where it's supposed to be—not the sofa, not the socks, not the toothbrush, not the coffee pot, not even the dogs. Nothing is where it's supposed to be. And it's baffling. To make matters worse, the house isn't even where it's supposed to be! For years you've driven the same route home, parked the car in the same garage stall, entered the same door and hung your keys on the same little peg. But not on moving day. Everything is different. The truth is, I hate moving day.

My family had only moved once when I was growing up. We relocated from a nice little split-level nest in a subdivision to a sprawling “haunted” house on the river. But that's where we stayed. The next time I would experience a “real” moving day would be when, after seminary, I got my first ministerial job and moved out of the dorms and into a friend's house. Everything was transferred in just a couple of trips. After that, I moved into a house. A truck was required for that move, but it still wasn't bad. After living in that house for 7 years, I experienced the real nightmare of the move for the first time as an adult. For weeks I went through things, sold things, gave them away—desperately trying to par down the ridiculous amount of stuff I'd accumulated. With my parred down, but still overwhelming amount of stuff, I moved to Wisconsin, and then recently, here to Aurora. I really hate moving day. Can anyone here relate?

¹ “Moving Day.” Newsbreak.com, March 6, 2021, <https://www.newsbreak.com/news/2176629678265/moving-day>.

In the reading I shared a few moments ago from I Kings, it was moving day—God’s moving day, so to speak. King David had intended to build God a new house, but God did not green-light the project. Time had passed, David’s son Solomon was on his father’s throne, and God was apparently ready for a change of scenery so Solomon got the go-ahead on building God a new residence.

Up until that point, God had lived in a tent, the tabernacle. When I say that God *lived* in a tent, I do want to clarify that the holy has never been limited to one time, one place, or one people. Since the construction of the Ark of the Covenant, the Hebrew people had experienced the divine presence with them in the form of a cloud resting on the Ark. And the Ark was kept in the tent of the tabernacle. This tent-temple was ideal for a people who were wandering the wilderness or establishing themselves in a new land. Now, however, it just screamed “temporary.” They were putting down roots and God should too.

The Bible reports that it took seven years to construct the temple. It was an imposing structure situated on a mount overlooking the city. It rose several stories high and was built of stone, cedar, and cypress wood. The interior was heavily carved with designs of palms, lilies, and cherubim. The interior was overlaid with gold and grand ceremonial furnishings of bronze were forged and installed. The temple was finished. Moving day arrived. God packed light—just the golden box, the Ark of the Covenant, containing the tablets of the law. When the Ark was set down in the inner sanctuary, our text says that the cloud of God’s presence filled the temple. God was apparently home.

And there God lived for more than 400 years before the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians and the Ark of the Covenant was lost forever. A few decades later, however, a second temple would be built that would stand for over five centuries—the temple that Jesus himself would visit to pray and to teach. Notably, though, the Bible never describes God’s presence indwelling the second temple in the way it had

the first, in the physical form of a cloud. Had moving day had come again for God? If so, where did God go?

A little more than three months ago, Charles and I moved a final time, to a pretty white Victorian on Chestnut St. in West Aurora. Since then, we've worked to make that house our home—inside and out. Admittedly, after lots of new plants and several freshly painted rooms, we still have work to do, but truth be told, we can neither one imagine calling any other spot home.

It can be hard for us not to anthropomorphize the Divine—not to assign human qualities, to assume human needs and desires, to impose human limitations on the Holy One of the cosmos. We may assume that the Holy needs four walls, a roof, and an easy chair to feel at home in a place, but, as I mentioned earlier, divinity packs light. I believe that the ancient Hebrews experienced God in Solomon's glittering temple. I believe native peoples experience holy in the cycles of the seasons, in the sunrise and sunset, in the trees and plants of the forest, and in the creatures that make their homes there. I believe that enlightenment thinkers experienced the divine in mathematical equations and scientific discoveries. I believe that Jesus' friends and later followers experience God in Jesus' all-encompassing love, selfless service, inspiring teaching, and tragic death.

And I believe that people experience the divine in other faiths, in other philosophies, in nature, and most importantly, in humanity. The holy never existed only in Solomon's temple. And the holy is not limited now. For those longing for certainty, clear-cut answers, and absolutes, this is an infinitely frustrating truth and an often-rejected one. For those simply longing for fresh experiences of the divine in their day-to-day lived experiences, relationships, and interactions, this is gospel good news!

I pray that as we go forth from this place, we might be open to fresh experiences of the holy with us this week. May we also be open to the possibility of being one of those fresh experiences of the holy for someone else. May it be so. Amen.