

“God is a mobile home”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Jeremiah 31:31-34

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Imagine a temple so beautiful that you feel God’s very presence. Maybe you don’t have to imagine too hard [look around at our own sanctuary]. That’s what it was like for the ancient Judeans, nearly three thousand years ago. They walked into a city, bustling with thousands of people, Jerusalem, and at its peak was the temple, the great work of King Solomon.

It was believed that the temple resided on the very spot where God created Adam. It took seven years to build. Archaeologists have found wall reliefs in Mesopotamia depicting Assyrians floating huge cedar logs down the coast to Jerusalem. The temple was three stories tall—cedar imported from Tyre, Sidon, and Lebanon, gilded in gold and silver, decorated with precious stones. Outside, a giant altar burnt offerings to God. Inside, in the main hall, the walls and floors were lined with gold and etched with drawings of palm trees and angels, meant to resemble the Garden of Eden. The flames of 10 golden lamps burned day and night, an unceasing grace before the darkness of the world. Beside each lamp stood a golden table with a loaf of bread, a reminder of God’s provision for the body and soul.

At the end of this great hall hung a cloth of purple, crimson, and blue, the doorway to the smallest and innermost room of the temple, the Holy of Holies, *qodesh qodashim*. The Bible says that in this room was the Judeans’ most prized possession, the Ark of the Covenant, a wooden chest gilded in gold, flanked by two large golden cherubim, containing the two stone tablets Moses carried from the mountain, bearing the Ten Commandments.

No one was allowed to enter except the High Priest, and even he only once a year on Yom Kippur, when the Jewish people fasted and atoned for their sins.

This was the home of God.

The Judeans never thought that God literally resided in the temple, like a person. God was in the heavens. God presided over all creation, was infinite and transcendent. Rather, the temple was a special thin place, connecting heaven and earth. Through prayer and offerings, the people could talk to God, even influence God, and so, this otherwise distant and abstract deity of the cosmos suddenly became intimate and close.

Now imagine what it felt like watching that temple burn—what it felt like to see those great cedar logs fall, the gold melt, the home of God destroyed by a foreign power. The people were taken to Babylon, far from their home, surrounded by temples to other gods, and no temple of their own. And so the people asked, Where is God now?

It's easy for us, in the post-modern era, to ridicule this belief as superstition. To think that God could be in a temple or a statue! But our beliefs are not so different. For we also locate God in stationary things, out there somewhere, cramming the God of the cosmos into our own Holy of Holies, so that we can feel more secure, more connected. Our boxes are just less literal.

What, if taken from us, would make us feel that we too had lost God? Our style of music? Would guitars banish God from this place? Or perhaps our doctrines and ideas about who God is and is not, who God loves and does not, what God wants and does not? Heresy has often been believed to deny God as well as any invading army. Or what if some beloved tradition, passed down to us by someone dear, something we've always done, something important and part of who we are, what if that were to vanish? Would God go with it? Is God in this building, in our homes and families, in our woods, lakes, and mountains, or in our books and paintings—in heaven? Or maybe God is in the acts of charity that serve our neighbor or the careers and volunteering that make life purposeful. Surely, that can't be wrong. But what happens when illness or age takes us, and we can't do some of those things anymore? Is God gone? Or what if I stand up here and speak of Jesus Christ, and that threatens our rationalism, our progressive intellectualism, our carefully formed agnosticism? Would that displace God?

There is nothing wrong with temples and woods and traditions, nothing wrong with beliefs and ideas; we all have special ways we connect with God. But when they become the home of God, when they root God in place, unmovable and unshakable, we run a risk: these beautiful, earthly things can break. Worse, God can become small.

In comes Jeremiah. A prophet who loved the temple, who tried to save the temple. Now, that temple has been destroyed. He hears the question: How do we find God without the temple? Jeremiah says that God has made a new promise. This new covenant involves an unmediated relationship with God, a personal relationship. God will place God's word within us, will write it on our hearts. We won't even need to teach other. It will all be right there, within ourselves. Morality, truth, justice, love, these won't be in a book or etched on a stone somewhere; they won't be in the mouth of a preacher or a high priest; they will already be yours, a book within. We can inspire each other, debate each other, care for each other, but we can't give this truth; we already have it. And *everyone* has it, from the king to the pauper, from the guy in jail to the person sleeping under a bridge.

Where is God's home? Wherever you are. Even in exile. Because you are God's home. Your soul—a burning ember of the greater fire that is God.

What's so compelling about Jeremiah's answer is that it's not a repudiation of the temple but a massive evolution of its thought. The temple wasn't meant to distance God. Quite the opposite. It was meant to bring God closer—just like our traditions, our buildings, our music styles, our doctrines. Jeremiah says, *Yeah, you were on to something; we do need an intimate God, but rather than being relatable in one stationary place, God's actually relatable everywhere we go, in everything we do, everything we experience, because that law, that word of God, isn't in some Holy of Holies anymore; it's in you. God's in you.*

We become the temple. *We* become the woods, the music, the Sistine Chapel, even Scripture. There was never anything wrong with encountering God in a church or on a mountaintop. But we can just as easily meet God elsewhere, when we remember a profound truth: we are the church. We are the mountaintop.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (3:16). The Gospels say this is why Jesus came. Jesus talks about himself as a new high priest, a new temple. In him, heaven and earth, humanity and divinity, collide once again, just as it did in that gold-gilded temple. He is Emmanuel, God with us. And through him, this temple expands into all creation, into you and me, and all people. Jesus promises that, after his resurrection, God will dwell within all God’s people as the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself will make his home in us. The Gospel of John, of course, describes Christ as the Word, which the prophet Jeremiah says is inscribed on our hearts.

Ephesians says, we “are being built together spiritually into a home for God” (2:22).

This isn’t a criticism of temple theology; it’s an expansion of that theology. God still has a home. But now it’s mobile. It’s not limited to one place or select group of people. It’s everywhere, and available to everyone. God is a mobile home—which is great, because a mobile God is exactly the one we need for these times of exile and disturbance, an unsettled God for unsettling times. A stationary God would be useless in these times of pandemic, personal loss, technological development, the undermining of democracy, changing consciousness of justice, climate change, quantum physics, the dying of Christendom, and the rebirth of the church.

This means we are searching for something we already have. We search books, fads, pleasures, traditions, charismatic leaders, everything and everyone, except the one voice, the one place, that really matters: ourselves. The seat of God—and of every hope for this world, for ourselves—is in the individual’s capacity for creative and rigorous reflection and action, emboldened by the knowledge that they too are a person of God, a prophet whose ideas and love matter, because they are born of God’s ideas and love.

Then, instead of teachers, we would be friends for the journey, not seeking to give truth, to conform and convert, but to awaken each other to the truth—the God, the love, the grace—that already resides within us. This faith community especially is here to help you find it, love it, follow it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in a speech in 1838 to a group of Harvard Divinity School graduates and faculty, criticized the church of his day, saying that it had become lifeless, just repetitions of the same old thoughts, nothing from the soul naked before God, nothing to indicate that God was still speaking and alive. His words were so controversial that he wasn’t invited back for 30 years.

He said, “Whilst the doors of the temple stand open, night and day, before every [person], and the oracles of this truth cease never, it is guarded by one stern condition; this, namely; it is an intuition. It cannot be received at second hand... It is the office of a true teacher to show us that God is, not was; that He speaketh, not spake... I look for the hour when that supreme Beauty,

which ravished the souls of those eastern men, and chiefly of those Hebrews, and through their lips spoke oracles to all time, shall speak in the West also.”

Were we to trust ourselves, to trust God—not money, not conspiracies, not traditions or mobs or social media or power—but were we to trust the beauty and compassion and truth that rise within, were we to give voice to that Spirit but for one moment, God would speak oracles through us, new words, new visions. God would remind Christianity and this troubled world: our God is a mobile God. She makes her home in you—and the work of Jesus, the union of heaven and earth, the great building of that temple, it continues in you. Hear again the words of Jesus to his disciples: “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me... will do even greater things than me” (John 14:12). **Amen.**