

I Kings 8: 22 - 30, 41-43

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16 B

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There's a Q&A page in the New York Times Book Review each week; different authors are asked a series of questions and the last question is always, "You're organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?" If you could invite a group of people, living or dead, literary or not, to a dinner party, who would you invite? Sometimes this is what writing a sermon feels like - who's coming to dinner this week? Jesus, of course, has a standing invitation, and while I know Paul should at least make a cameo, he's not really great at the back-and-forth of a good conversation. So, this week Solomon pulls up to the table. The wildcards are the people who get invitations when you run into them along the way - those whose voices or stories waft in by way of intentional study or by happenstance. This week two places are set for two women from different centuries and different faiths: American poet Emily Dickinson and Dutch, Jewish writer Etty Hillesum who died at twenty-nine in the Holocaust. We'll leave the menu planning to my better half, and I'll get the conversation going with this question: *where does God live?*

Solomon launches in, regaling the table with his hopes and prayers for the Temple he's constructed, a generations-long dream fulfilled. This house for God has been long hoped for, and in so many ways Solomon is building it as much for God, as for his father David, as for himself. We get a glimpse though - even as he goes on and on a bit - that even he sees the inherent folly of believing that humans could build a home for God. "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" He knows God doesn't have nor need a fixed address; yet, he has a kernel of hope that God will be attuned to the prayers offered in this particular place, heeding and hearing the pleas of all who come near.

And in a move that shows those of us who are gathered around this dinner table how capacious Solomon's imagination is, he lets us know that he believes there is no stinginess in God's attention, that the prayers of the foreigner will also be heard and received, those not of Israel, those from distant lands, that all the peoples of the earth are invited and welcome. It's as if even as the walls go up, Solomon understands that the walls must be permeable - that no place can solely or wholly contain the uncontainable God.

Etty Hillesum chimes in. She knows what Solomon can't imagine: that the Temple will be destroyed, and that the Jewish people will spend centuries, millennia, facing discrimination and devastation. Her last writings are letters postmarked from Auschwitz and a diary from the work camp of Westerbork. "The sky is full of birds, the purple lupins stand up so regally and peacefully, two little old women have sat down for a chat, the sun is shining on my face - and right before our eyes, mass murder... The whole thing is simply beyond comprehension." Revealing the enormous capacity of the human heart to keep beating and to keep loving, she writes that she has learned to love even Westerbork - an anti-temple if ever there was one. And while she struggles with daily life, she holds fast to an honest faith, and she finds that God lives in such dire and desolate places too. She reads to us from her journals in which she speaks directly to God, "Alas, there doesn't seem to be much You, Yourself, can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold You responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last." Etty looks at us gathered here and states with not a little defiance, "God cannot be God unless we create a dwelling place in our hearts."

How do we build a temple within our own hearts and minds, a place for God to dwell to the last? How do we defend the audacious idea that God can be found in human-crafted churches and temples and in the broken and violent corners of the world and ultimately in the beat of every heart, every heart - even the heart of the foreigner and the ones in distant lands, even in the heart of our enemies?

It's one of those eternal questions, and across the table a quiet woman who lived upstairs in her family home in New England in the middle of the nineteenth century whispers, "I dwell in possibility." Emily Dickinson, who wrote her poems on the backs of envelopes, says again, "I dwell in Possibility – A fairer House than Prose – More numerous of Windows – Superior – for Doors – Of Chambers as the Cedars – Impregnable of eye – And for an everlasting Roof / The Gambrels of the Sky – Of Visitors – the fairest – For Occupation – This – The spreading wide my narrow Hands / To gather Paradise –" She could be riffing on the psalm with its sparrows and swallows, valleys and heights, the paradise gathered her small hands just somehow like the paradise of the courts of the Lord. Never denying the brutal truths that Etty reminds us of, Emily picks up on even Etty's appreciation for the purple lupins and the sunshine. And more than that, she props open the door between humble house and the vast world, between holy shrines and a little imagination for possibility. When we see and name the beauty of this world, we grow our heart's potential to hold the presence of God, a presence accompanying us everywhere, even through inevitable days of destruction.

"This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" Now, the disciples weren't really invited to our dinner party, but they are almost always listening in on the conversation. Jesus, holding time and wisdom in abundance, has been talking about bread for what seems like weeks on end. He knows that Solomon and Etty and Emily and you and I are doing our level human best to understand where God lives. And he repeats himself, "abide in me, and I abide in you."

Solomon isn't wrong to build the Temple, to create with the best minds and skills and materials a finite place to honor and worship an infinite God. And as Solomon expands the boundaries of who is welcome, he gets even closer to getting it right. The places we build for God must always be larger than our own needs, like building a sanctuary in a small river town in 1832 for a congregation of unimaginable hundreds, like opening doors and ramps and halls and chapels to face the world around us.

And faithful Etty wasn't wrong. She knew her small heart could be a home for God, and that God abandons no one and no place. She did not curse God for the horrors of her time, nor conclude that God did not live there and then too, but instead she endeavored to push back by defending the idea that God lived in her heart no matter the circumstances. She understood that wherever she lived or died, God as an idea is useless, but that God dwelling in us is power beyond measure. The places she called home deteriorated until she was in a living prison, but even there she believed that God heeded her and heard her prayers.

In almost a mirror image of security and peacefulness, Emily imagined wonders beyond her small, cloistered room, imagining possibilities too vast to be hemmed in by punctuation or propriety. When we dwell in possibility and when possibility dwells in us, wherever we actually are, we are living in the world God hopes for us. When we feel that our four-chambered heart is full to overflowing, such that we can dream of houses for God for all - for foreigners and sparrows too, then perhaps we are abiding in Christ. "Where can we go?" Simon Peter asked, and the answer is that wherever we go - desolate springs or Solomon's house or a dinner party with some strange guests, we abide in the house of God.

Where does God live? In every place of beauty, constructed with love and adoration in mind. Where does God live? In the forgotten and cruel corners too. Where does God live? In the reach of the cosmos and in the human heart made ready.