

## Where Does God Live?

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

October 10, 2010, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

**Jeremiah 31:31-34**

**Ephesians 3:14-21**

*“...and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.”*

Where does God live? On one hand, the question is the question of a child whose mind is fixed on the tangible, the embodied, the literal meaning of words. To get up on a Sunday morning and go to God’s house begs the question that once caused many of us to mistake the man in the black robe, who apparently lived in the house we visited every Sunday, for God.

But on the other hand, the question of God’s dwelling on earth is one of the most vexing and persistent questions in all of Scripture and, I daresay, in all of human existence. Whether this is because, like children, we want to know God’s literal proximity to us, want a place to go when we need to talk with God face to face; or whether we want God contained in a particular place, a God who is more readily under our control, as God is if God can be said to live here and not there, with my tribe and not yours, I do not know. I only know enough to seek the dwelling place of God in the story we are given.

To begin with the story’s mythic beginning, God dwells briefly with mortals, walking in the garden in the cool of the day. Tragically, we choose to keep our distance. God’s endless pursuit of us thus commences. Fast forward to the wilderness where God is met by Moses on the top of the highest mountain and comes frighteningly near to God’s people in the law and the commandment written on tablets of stone, “so that I may dwell among them,” says the Lord by way of explanation. Again there is a dust-up, but finally a portable tent of meeting is built to house the tablets, a tent that almost acts as a lightning rod for God’s glory to appear, God’s presence to be made manifest in the wilderness of our lives where there is nothing if there is not God.

Landedness raises the ante on the purpose, the place and the permanence of God’s dwelling on earth. As God’s chosen tribes quit the wilderness and settle down, the Ark of the Covenant (from our human point of view) dwells in the thick of human conflict, often being cast as a lucky charm in battle or a pawn of power politics. Nothing much has changed in three thousand years! After one particularly disastrous episode in which the ark is stolen by the Philistines, the decision is made to park the ark safely at Kiriath-jearim. There it remains for decades until King David retrieves it and carries it into Jerusalem. Religion and politics are thereby wed forever and ever, complicating the plot concerning the power and purpose of God’s dwelling on earth.

As to the permanence, David wrestles with his conscience (a very selective conscience, I might add!) because he is living in a house of cedar while the ark, the place of meeting between God and mortals, is sitting under a tent. Knowing David’s mind on the matter, God forestalls the king’s capital campaign, saying to the prophet Nathan, “I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving around in a tent and a tabernacle.”

Nevertheless God's containment is inevitable. Supposedly with God's permission, Solomon builds God a house to end all houses, giving lip service at the dedicatory ceremonies to God's freedom: "...will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house I have build!" For generation upon generation, kings come and go, as do idols and their worship. Still God's people go up to Jerusalem, singing psalms of ascent, to make sacrifices to the God who brought them out with a mighty hand and redeemed them from the house of slavery.

But in the sixth century B.C., the unthinkable happens: God's dwelling place is leveled, the temple in Jerusalem is destroyed and God's people are sent into exile. The question of God's location is up in a way never before imagined. In fact, so much of the story we have rehearsed was written by people in exile who feared the worst: feared that the destruction of God's dwelling place on earth and their expulsion from the land God had promised was the end of the story of God's steadfast love and faithfulness toward them.

Enter the prophet Jeremiah who, after speaking God's judgment against the people's idolatry and disobedience, addresses the question of God's dwelling place with a radically new word in anticipation of the destruction of God's house. "No longer will the law be engraved in stone and displayed in rotundas for all to see but none to follow," translates Presbyterian preacher Richard Floyd. "The days are surely coming when the law will be engraved in the people's hearts and displayed in their lives. No longer will the people know about God—all the right words, all the right theology. The days are surely coming when the people, from the least to the greatest, will know God—with all the intimacy that word entails."

But I am equally struck by the fact that in the destruction of the temple, God has been sprung from sedimented, settled religion! God again is portrayed as the actor, the initiator of a relationship with God's creatures: when other helpers fail and comforts flee, help of the helpless, God abides. Here as in the wilderness, faith is characterized by a life lived in trust toward God. "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people," says the Lord. God's dwelling place, says Jeremiah, is now the human heart.

Yet Scripture means something quite other than our personal human feelings when it references the human heart. Reason and action, obedience and righteousness are located in the heart of biblical characters. The heart is where the commandments are kept, is the impetus that compels us to seek God's face, is the bulwark against idolatry. With temple and its sacrificial system in ruins, the God who hates, who despises festivals, and takes no delight in solemn assemblies, who will no longer accept burnt offerings and will not look on them, who would even banish the noise of their songs and will refuse to listen to their melodies, who requires justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream: this God is on the loose! Now, says Jeremiah whose way had been prepared by Amos, the dwelling place of God will be the heart that obeys and directs God's scattered people to walk in the way of the Lord.

But this is not the case for long! A remnant returns to Jerusalem, rebuilds the temple, and redoubles the human effort to keep God's ritual laws of purity while God's people wait for David's heir to appear and restore David's kingdom. We are almost in familiar territory!

A few hundred years later, in the fullness of time, the angel Gabriel announces that an heir to David's throne has been conceived in Mary's womb, evoking in some the

hope of God's return to the settled dwelling that is the Jerusalem temple where God's Son will reign over Israel. But according to Luke's birth narrative and John's prologue, God's dwelling with us, where God will live for a season is in the weakness and vulnerability of a human life. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," John writes. The Word that was in the beginning and was with God and was God became flesh and pitched a tent among us in the wilderness of our lives. The Son who did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself, writes Paul, taking the form of a slave, humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Where does God live? As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it only months before his own murder, "God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross." He has no place to lay his head until, crucified and dead, he is buried in a borrowed grave.

We first seek him there as though he dwelt among the dead and the deadly rites of religion in his name. "Why," asked the angels on Easter morning, "do you seek the living among the dead?" As we behold the dwelling place of God in him who was dead and is alive forevermore, we also behold what our own lives might look like were God's law written on our hearts, were Christ to dwell in our hearts through faith. "This is what we mean when we speak of Christ dwelling in our hearts," said Bonhoeffer in his final lecture to seminarians on the cost of discipleship at the seminary of the Confessing Church in Finkenwalde. "His life on earth is not finished yet, for he continues to live in the lives of his followers. Indeed it is wrong to speak of the Christian life: we should speak rather of Christ living in us. 'I live, and yet no longer I, but Christ...in me.' Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified and glorified has entered my life and taken charge....And because he really lives his life in us," says Bonhoeffer, "we too can 'walk even as he walked' and 'do as he has done' and 'love as he has loved' and 'forgive as he forgave'...laying down our lives for [the other, the outcast, the despised, the stranger, the alien] as he did for us."

I say again: Christ dwelling in our heart is not a private spiritual affair. Marcus Barth, in his commentary on Ephesians, notes that most translations of the verse before our text presume the author is asking for God to strengthen our inner being, a translation that plays fast and loose with the Greek in order to render the English inclusive. Rather, according to Barth, the verse should read, "I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, he may grant that you be strengthened *in the direction* of the inner man who is Christ." That is to say we, who have been running from God since the beginning of time, have been stopped in our tracks and turned toward the one who has pitched his tent with us, turned toward him in whom we are being built together...into a dwelling place for God. This is not our own doing, we read earlier in Ephesians: it is a gift of God!

"Anxious souls will ask what room there is left for God now," writes Dietrich at the last to his friend Eberhard Bethge. The only room I know is this one, this community filled with anxious souls who have come seeking him who lives in the hearts of those seeking his face. For this reason, I bow my knees to the Father, from whom every family in heaven and earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his spirit in the direction of the inner man who is Christ, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generation, forever and ever. Amen.

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