

## WORTHY OF OUR WORSHIP

I Kings 8: 1,6,10-12, 22-30, 41-43

Psalm 84

John 6: 56-69

Mason First Presbyterian

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Whenever I have come into this church in the past few years, I appreciate all over again the planning efforts of many and the financial contributions of even more of us that have led to the improvements in the building. As by far the oldest worship space in Mason, it continues to stand as a testimony to the importance of faith. A similar appreciation, even praise, for a sacred space is found in each of our Old Testament readings today. Both the I Kings passage and Psalm 84 speak of the Israelite Temple in glowing terms - the first upon its dedication, and the second, a worshiper's reflection on what it means to enter and to worship within its walls.

The psalmist claims that just one day within these courts of the Lord is better than a thousand he might spend in any other place. Then take the next words of this tenth verse, "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God," Another alternate translation might be, "I choose to stand at the threshold." I think of a former long-time member of this church. Some of you will remember the humble person of Howard Coon. Week by week, before and after worship, Howard would locate himself in and around the main entrance back here, a true doorkeeper in the Lord's house. It's as if he attached himself not only to that threshold but, in a welcoming way, to whomever else entered in to share with him the worship hour.

But the rapturous words that spill forth from both Solomon as he dedicates the Temple and later the psalmist also hint at a certain tentativeness amid the praise. Solomon, of course, is known for his wisdom, and so even he who has built up this house of worship wisely pauses to reflect on what the Lord God might think of his efforts. The two sentences of verse 27 contain first a question and then a pointed realization on the part of Solomon: "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!" For sure, it's a great day and a great human accomplishment, but a thoughtful realism also sets in. Solomon includes in his prayer the plea that God might pay attention to what happens within its walls. In a kind of anticipation of the Lord's Prayer, where we ask that God's will may be done on earth as it is perfectly done in heaven, so here Solomon asks that God's eternal concerns may not keep his eyes from the comings and goings of the people within this Temple.

It strikes me that Solomon's prayer offers us a proper sense of humility in all of our earthly doings. That wise king had no way of knowing that his holy structure, in all of its magnificence, would be destroyed within centuries by the invading empire of Babylon. He could not conceive that a successor to that Temple would then be built, only to be pulled down in turn; or that an even more splendid building would rise up under Herod the Great, and again be utterly destroyed, stone by stone, by the Roman Empire, all within just a few decades of its building. What I'm suggesting is that the literal ups and downs of even such a holy place may give us perspective on any and all of our everyday earthly enterprises, and the significance we attach to them. What is it we finally honor, and even worship?

I'm not saying here that we not take a proper delight in all we might accomplish. It is right and fitting that we do all things as well as possible. In his letter to the church in Philippi, the apostle Paul urges us to think upon and rejoice in all that is good and true and beautiful. We humans, Christians and all others, are capable of once creating and then improving upon both structures, such as this church, but even more, conditions, within our world. God has given us tasks, to do them well.

But at the same time we are not to endow our efforts with ultimate significance. That would be to fall into the twin sins of pride and idolatry, of which Scripture offers many examples. As Paul says, we are to *think upon* "these things" that are worthy of praise, but we are not to worship them. We are to weigh and measure and work at many pursuits, but we are not to invest them with an importance that exceeds their time and place. The first of the ten commandments contains this instruction: "You shall have no other gods before me." Both here and in a number of other places, the Bible seems to acknowledge that other "gods," other significant forces, are out there for people's temptation. But do not yield to them. Someone has wryly noted that without the Hebrew people's struggle with false gods throughout their history, the Old Testament might be a mere short story.

So: the fine line we have to walk is to appreciate, but not to worship. We believe that certain things are just and true, without granting them our final allegiance. For years, I have made a distinction between our belief in things *that* may be, and the more important matter of believing *in*. In some way that difference goes back to an encounter that a fellow seminarian had years ago. Some of you may have heard me tell this story before, but if so, I think it's worth hearing again. I'd like you even to remember by it the distinction we are trying to draw today. My friend

Gerhard Grau told of coming from his native Germany, where he had worked as a bricklayer, to get his undergraduate degree here in America. Within his first few days in the freshman dorm, he came upon a hallway discussion (commonly known as a “bull session”) at which the evening’s topic was smoking. The debaters were interested in this newcomer’s opinion, and so they asked him, “Do you believe in smoking?” Gerhard, doing his best with this strange and relatively new English language, struggled in his mind with the question: “Believe in...? Do I *believe in* - smoking?” The group waited for his answer, which finally came out this way, spoken in his heavy German accent. He said, “I shmoke. I *believe in*: Jesus Christ!”

There we have the distinction between secondary matters and ultimate matters, between other gods that may or may not be, and the one true living God. To what extent do we invest ourselves in transient concerns, letting them take up space in our lives? Are we not all guilty of that, to some degree? We let the little things take over, and control our moments and our days. Even bigger things, like family and country, may likewise veer in the direction of idolatry. We need to look out.

And then we may look to the answer to the question old Solomon wisely posed to himself: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth?” Signs of the presence of God, like the Ark of the Covenant, may take their place within the Temple. Even that is but a thing found within a building, both of which will disappear into history. But what of God himself? How will He come to dwell on the earth, and come, to put a slant on a word, come “in deed?” There is one, we believe, who has arrived with mighty deeds upon the earth, and that is Jesus Christ. Centuries after Solomon, he came to fulfill the longings of the people. He came in real, historical time, not to dwell here forever, but to make a difference in our present lives and our eternity.

It is He who challenged the disciples in our lesson from John, asking of them as others had scattered, “Do you also wish to go away?” The disciple Peter answers him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” Those words are to be echoed in our own lives: *We have come to believe and to know*. Week by week we come to this place to witness to that belief, and to grow in our knowing. Only this one named Jesus, above all the other concerns of our lives, is worthy of our worship. Many things come and go on their way. He alone is the One we worship.

Charles Herrick