

Finding God – Ben Wayman

1 Kings 8:(1, 6, 10-11) 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

When I was a senior in college, I felt like God had abandoned me. I no longer felt God's nearness like I had in high school or even my first couple years of college. And that year, as I was about to graduate, I was desperate for some sense of direction for my life. But God seemed to have vanished without a trace.

A friend suggested I spend an hour in prayer every day. So I did. Every day that year—rain or shine, snow or sleet—I walked through the gullies looking for God. Try as I did, I never felt the presence of God. By the end of my senior year, I was as lost as I was the first day.

Hearing about St. John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul* in a theology class offered some comfort. It was a relief to learn that my experience was not unique. But I was still left with the problem that I had no clue where to find God, much less discern what God wanted for my life. Professor McPeak instructed us students to quit our navel-gazing—and I agreed with him—but I had little idea of where to find God if I stopped looking inward. I thought if Jesus was in my heart, prayer was the only path to reach him. But for some reason, I couldn't find God on this path anymore.

Maybe there's a time when you were in a similar place as me, or maybe you're there right now. If so, today's readings are for you. They are all about the presence of God. Our lessons today show us where God can be found.

Our lesson from 1 Kings and the prayer of Psalm 84 show that God's presence is in the Temple. In 1 Kings Solomon dedicates the Temple and at this planned event, God showed up, right on cue. The Temple had been finished for nearly a year, but Solomon and his event planning committee decided to delay the grand dedication until Sukkot (also known as the Festival of Booths, or Tabernacles), which was a seven-day festival meant to remind Israel of its desert wanderings. During this time of wandering, the Israelites lived in temporary tents or booths as they were led by God's presence, which was visible to them as a Column of Cloud during the day and a Pillar of Fire by night.

By dedicating the Temple during the festival, Israel is hoping and pleading that the Temple will be where God shows up just as consistently as during their wanderings. And so it's really a thrill and a relief that God's glory appears on point at the dedication of the Temple. This is not only a ringing endorsement of the house that Solomon had built, but even more a confirmation that God was once again nearby. God's people knew exactly where to find God.

It's no surprise then, that the psalmist leads us in prayer the way he does. This psalm is a pilgrimage psalm, for people on their way to meet God at the Temple. *How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God ... For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere* (Ps. 84:1-2, 10). You guys know that song? "Better is one day in your courts; Better is one day in your house; Better is one day in your courts, than thousands

elsewhere.” That song stopped working for me my senior year when I was no longer able to see or feel God’s presence.

But Solomon and the Assembly saw and felt God’s presence on this day of dedication. The Temple was a big deal because that’s where God was. For Solomon, the Temple is the place where God dwells and the place to which all people, including foreigners, could direct their prayers. Notice that even in early Israelite thinking, the foreigners—the Gentiles—can experience God’s presence if they know where to look.

Before we move on to our Gospel lesson, I want to point out a strange tension in our reading from 1 Kings. In verse 27, in the middle of Solomon’s prayer, he says, *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!* This is Solomon’s attempt to hold God’s presence and transcendence together at the same time. God is present in the Temple, but not contained by the Temple. I suspect Solomon, the Israelites, and many of us receive this as a great relief—that God is present here and now in some way, but God is not subject to our world. God isn’t stuck here in buildings and of course, God doesn’t dwell on the earth, right?

Here’s where John’s Gospel messes everything up for us. John’s Gospel is all about how God does indeed dwell on the earth, and how this is difficult for and offensive to us. The Gospel begins with the announcement that the Word became flesh and dwelled among us. The great shock of our lessons today is that despite our pious claims to want to know God, for God to be near us, when God actually does come near us, we realize this is way too close for comfort. That’s why I think Eugene Peterson is exactly right when he instructs Christians to “be slow to pray.” Be slow to pray, he says, because prayer puts us on God’s terms, not our own. And God’s terms are very different than the hopes or expectations we normally have. When we pray, we enter into the presence of the Living God who wants us to become like God, and this transformation is deeply uncomfortable and requires every bit of courage we can muster.

Today is our fifth and final week of knocking around in the 6th chapter of John’s Gospel. Today we reach the climax of the story and we notice how the nearer Jesus gets, the more uncomfortable people are, and the fewer decide to follow him. We begin with Jesus feeding 5,000 people with five barley loaves and two fish. Jesus’s mega church following was convinced that this sign meant he was the messianic king who would set them free from Roman rule, and so they tried to force him to be king (Jn 6:15). But Jesus slipped away. We saw Jesus walk on water and identify himself to his disciples as the great “I Am”, Ἐγώ εἰμι—I I am who I am—the same strange name God revealed when he spoke to Moses from the burning bush (Exod. 3:14). The crowd followed Jesus across the sea to Capernaum, Jesus declared he is the “Bread of Life,” and then refused to be seeker-sensitive in his sermons to his dwindling church.

By the time we end our reading today, his church of thousands has dwindled to a synagogue of a little more than a dozen disciples that is shrinking by the minute. Turning to the last twelve disciples, Jesus asks them, *Do you also wish to go away?* With this question, the future of the church appeared to be hanging by a thread. In John 6 Jesus progressively draws nearer and nearer to those who thought they wanted God, and what we find is God’s presence and life is too difficult and offensive for many of his disciples then and many of us today.

John 6 is full of mystery. But this morning, I will stick to just two observations and they both have to do with where to find God. My first observation extends from the fact that Jesus refuses to translate his teaching into a more palatable register. He flat out refuses to say he's speaking in metaphor and that's because he's *not*. His listeners assumed he was, and we Protestants have been trained to think he was too. Jesus's talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood is deeply uncomfortable if we can't understand it metaphorically. But Jesus refuses to give us that out. At each turn, Jesus ups the ante and insists he wants his disciples to *consume* him, to take his life into their own, and so become like him. Early Christians were accused by the Romans of cannibalism and it's easy to see why: Christians ate the flesh and drank the blood of Jesus the Christ.

What John 6 offers us today is the difficult teaching that God can be found in bread and wine. And what makes this especially difficult is the fact that it may rarely, if ever, feel like you're meeting God in Communion.

When I was in seminary I took a class on the Protestant Reformation that was taught through the lens of the Eucharist. Here Professor Steinmetz explained to us different Christian understandings of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Christians agreed that Christ is present in Communion, but Christians during the Reformation and today are all over the map on how and where Christ is present in Communion.

For some of our Christian brothers and sisters, especially Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, and Anglican Christians, John 6 is crucial to understanding Communion. In John 6 we learn that God gives us God's very self in bread and wine, making them be for us Christ's body and blood—just as God did by becoming flesh and dwelling among us. The mystery of Communion is really no different than the mystery of the Incarnation. *Christ is present here! For you!* Professor Steinmetz would shout in German as he channeled his best Martin Luther impression and pounded his lectern.

If you are looking for God as I was my senior year, look no further. God is here, and God wants to fill you with God's life as you receive Christ's body and blood. The Spirit who gives life makes this possible, as we see in John 6. The early Christian bishop Ignatius of Antioch called the Eucharist the "medicine of immortality." Now Christians don't believe in magic, but we believe in mystery. Here we eat God and become God. And it's a mystery how this is so. In seminary, I learned where Christians had been finding God for nearly two thousand years, and I learned that I too could bank on God being present at the Communion Table, because that's where God promised to be found. On faith, I believe God meets us in Communion, but it's the tried and tested faith of the Christian community, which for me is far more convincing than my own fleeting feelings.

So that's the observation about following Jesus being difficult. The observation about Jesus causing offense extends from the truth that God wants to make us divine. Literally, not metaphorically. This means that we must stop being offended by the mysteries of the faith. Christians have used many words to describe God's making us divine: *theosis*, divinization, deification, holiness, Christian perfection. The offense is that in order for God to make us little Christs, God became human and dwelled with us. Literally. That means that God emptied

himself, left a metaphorical throne in a metaphorical place and literally entered into our concrete and messy, suffering world. God drew near to us because God loves us and wants us to share God's life forever. God is here whether you feel it or experience it or not. The Eucharist, then, is a gift for *everyone* because it does not matter whether you understand what is going on here. Through this gift we receive Christ in these edible elements.

If this doesn't offend you, it may be because you haven't been raised with sensitivities that insist upon God's utter transcendence. When my imam friend Abdul Hakim addresses Greenville students at the mosque, he scoffs at the idea that God would ever poop or pee or burp. But that's exactly what we believe God did when God became man. Or maybe Christ's literal presence in the Eucharist doesn't offend you because you won't shake the view that despite all of this flesh and blood talk, it really is about metaphor after all. The problem is, Jesus himself refuses to say this.

Even if you're not offended by literal understandings of Christ's body and blood, our reading from Ephesians offers us plenty to be offended by. Here we complete our seventh and final reading in Ephesians and we learn that becoming little Christs means becoming people who suffer war. Were you ever told that when you were baptized, you were enlisting in a war against the devil?! We should have told you that, or at least, we should have made that clearer. But really the offense here is that we are to wage this war non-violently, which we see modeled by the author who describes himself as *an ambassador in chains* (Eph. 6:20). The author tells us we are to be made strong in God's power, which helps us become a people who can be killed rather than kill as we love our enemies and do good to those who hate us.

Notice the armor of God mentioned here, which is mostly defensive armor. Here we find Christians are to withstand the attacks of the devil, the rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, and spiritual forces of evil and return these aggressions with truth, justice, peace, faith, and prayer. We have been enlisted in a violent war we are to fight non-violently, in the subversive and stronger power of God. God is forming a new kind of army.

But make no bones about it: we are at war. Christians should never be surprised when we are attacked or wronged or injured. And make no mistake: while these cosmic powers are very real, they exercise their power through people and systems. As Pastor David Hawkins stated in his Baccalaureate Address last May, these powers and spiritual forces of evil are in our very board meetings. We must be alert and courageous to *stand firm* against the *wiles of the devil*. But for people who are shaped by the violence of our world and our country, we must not allow ourselves to be offended that God is training us to be an army of bold martyrs.

The difficulty and offense of the Gospel is that God has come near us so that we might become little Christs who love and die at the hands of this world. We know what happened to Christ, and so we know what will happen to us as we follow Jesus. The sword of the gospel will provoke this world against us. But we must stand firm. We must continue to tell the truth as we put on our breastplates of justice (δικαιοσύνης). We must continue to say Black Lives Matter, to tell the truth about racism in this country and how Christians have and are contributing to it, and we must work to dismantle it. We must be quick and clear as we proclaim a gospel of peace. It will require the faith of our whole community to sustain that message in a world bent on war. And we

will need shields and helmets because the sword of the Spirit—the gospel that we preach—is a message that draws a fierce force from this broken world.

And we must become a people of prayer who submit to this risky life of non-violent Jesus-living in a world at war.

The good news in all this is we can be bold because God is with us. We know where to find God. And what's more: as we receive the body and blood of Christ at this Table, we receive God so that we may evermore live in Him and He in us. So God is *here* (point to Table). And God is *here* (point to people) as we eat his flesh and drink his blood. God makes it possible for us to be his presence in this world. Literally.

May we become a people who can embrace the mystery of the gospel that God is present in bread and wine, just as he was present in flesh and blood. May we be bold in our witness that God has come near us to make us more than we could ever ask or imagine. And may we become a people who continues to be filled with God every time we gather. Thanks be to God.