

IT CANNOT BE CONTAINED

the Rev. Seth Patterson

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Minister for Spiritual Formation & Theater

Text: 1 Kings 8:23–30

Solomon said: “Lord, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. You have kept your promise to David my father; you have promised and you have fulfilled it. “Now God of Israel, keep the promises you made to us when you said, ‘You shall never fail to have a successor to sit on the throne, if only your descendants are careful in all they do to walk with me faithfully.’ And now, God, let your word that you promised come true.”

Solomon asked: “But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day. May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, ‘My Name shall be there,’ so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear us from wherever you are, and when you hear, forgive.”

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We’ve come a long way from the drama of David. We are in the reign of David’s son, Solomon, who is now king. Solomon is a significant figure in our religious history. Our Jewish siblings consider him to be one of the 48 prophets, and our Muslim siblings regard him as a major prophet. Solomon reigned over a prosperous time in this tiny kingdom’s history, and things must have been going well for the Kingdom of Israel, which seems to have had both enough wealth and a lack of conflict to allow Solomon to build a new palace and the Temple. Remember that, before this, the Ark of the Covenant, the most sacred object to the Israelites, had been kept in a tent. I imagine it was a nice tent, but a tent nonetheless. Now the Ark has received a new home, inside the stone and timber Temple decorated with bronze, gold, and ornate carvings. Solomon then dedicates the Ark into the new Temple. This is what is remembered as his prayer. Wherever the Ark is at home, so also is Yahweh—God.

In the world of the ancient near east, of which the Kingdom of Israel was a tiny part, gods were generally seen as human-like, super-powered residents of the land that worshipped them. So, a temple was seen as the home of the resident god. When things were going well for the region, it was because the god was at home and pleased. When things went poorly, it was because the god had vacated its home and the people were left on their own against the chaos of life.

For much of their history, the ancient Israelites were not much different. They believed Yahweh lived inside the tent, sitting atop the Ark and feasting on the offerings the people provided. What we hear today from Solomon is a question that, merely by being asked, forever changes the substance of the religion that we have come from: “But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens . . . cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!”

And here this wise King Solomon lets Yahweh out of the Temple. He breaks with the tradition of the region and of his own history and stops trying to contain God in a human-made building. And this is at the

dedication of the Temple that he had just finished having built! The Temple now becomes a different type of destination. It is no longer Yahweh's singular home but rather a meeting place, a sacred space among many.

God cannot be contained! God is too expansive to be defined, let alone kept in one place. God is anywhere and everywhere, and any attempts by people to contain God are merely attempts to shrink God to something we think we can define, to something understood, to something we think we can control. God cannot be contained. And Solomon named this incredible and complicated truth. God cannot be contained in a dwelling made by people. Whether it is the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem or the sanctuaries of our modern churches, God cannot be contained.

This means that God can be found anywhere. I have heard members of this community name this. I have heard you say that you encounter God while walking in the woods or while being near a lake, in the presence of loved ones or while listening to certain music, dancing, or participating in various art forms. God can be encountered anywhere; there is no specific place.

This means that God is not solely contained in some of the places that we name as sacred. This includes the important-to-us Sanctuary here at Plymouth. This is important to hold gently as we are finishing our second summer not able to gather together in that space, and as we are approaching an autumn with so much uncertainty about what is possible after all. As much as we miss the familiarity of our Sanctuary, as much as we miss the feeling of it and the sounds it contains, as much as we miss the people that join us, God does not live in that room. God is as present in our Sanctuary as God is present in all places at all times.

A commentator on the book of Kings said: "Like the Temple that Solomon built, the existence of a Sanctuary is just a concrete representation of the possibility of God's presence amid a community in worship, but God's freedom transcends any building made by human hands."¹ This same possibility of God's presence is found under the tent or in a field or in our homes. God is present when we come together with the intention to encounter God. The presence of God is felt when we seek it, when we come together in a worshipful posture, when we are open to receiving. This doesn't mean that we abandon our intentional spaces of encounter, like our Sanctuary, but rather that we do not depend on its availability to seek the presence of God. In addition to our many sanctuaries, we can rest in the knowledge that God cannot be contained. Like the air that sustains us, God exists wherever there is life.

If God cannot be contained in only one room or building or sanctuary, if God cannot be contained at all, then what can we do? It means that we are free to seek God in untraditional spaces and at untraditional times. Where can I catch a glimpse of the presence of God at the grocery store? Or while sitting in traffic or at a wedding or a funeral? At a baseball game, school, office, restaurant or in an intensive care unit in a hospital? If God is everywhere, if God cannot be contained, then we can prepare ourselves to catch glimpses of God's presence anywhere. But we have to look, we have to be open to see, we have to be ready for the encounter. We have to be willing to see past our own selves, our own needs, and our own preconceptions to catch a glimpse of the presence of God in the everywhere of our lives.

The question that this brings up for me now is, if God cannot be contained in any dwelling or sanctuary or space, what does that mean for us people? What I mean is, if God is uncontainable in space, then God also cannot be held contained in any one person. God cannot only be found in me or in you. God cannot only be found in people who seem to do everything right or have the correct titles or seem to be happy all the time, people who look a certain way or act a certain way. God cannot be contained in only the people

¹Irene Nowell, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume III* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 78.

who have attributes that we prefer: skin color, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, ability, power, wealth, position, or age. God cannot be contained in any of these definitions of human division.

This uncontainable God is in every single person. If God is everywhere, then God is also in and connecting everyone. If God is everywhere and in everyone, then God is also found in every living thing. God cannot be contained. This doesn't mean that we have to like all the places that God is present, but we need to remember that God is as present in the blight as in the shiny, in the under-invested as in the over-invested. And if we don't like the condition of God's dwelling, then we can work to change it.

What would it mean if we began to approach everywhere as if it contained God, if everywhere was as sacred as a temple or a sanctuary? How would this change our relationship with place? What if we lived as if God was fully present not only in our Sanctuary, but in your home, your workplace, your school? In George Floyd Square, North and South Minneapolis, in Afghanistan and Chicago? What would it mean if the place of God was on fire in California and the Boundary Waters and flooded in Haiti? What if we look for glimpses of the presence of God in places of war, deforestation, melting glaciers, and acidifying oceans? We work to keep our Sanctuary well-maintained; what could be possible if we uncontained God and saw God everywhere? How would we start to treat everywhere?

The same goes for people. What would it mean if we began to approach everyone as if they contained God and ourselves as if we contained God? How would this change our relationship with others and ourselves? What if you saw God not only in those you liked and agreed with, but in everyone? What if God is standing in line at the food shelf, driving too slow or erratically in traffic, in halls of power, marching for something that you disagree with, or sleeping on cardboard? What if God was in the birds choking on plastic, plants succumbing to deforestation, and animals left without homes or food? We work to maintain our own selves, what could be possible if we uncontained God and saw God in every living thing?

This could feel overwhelming at first, but I suppose we would rather be overwhelmed by the presence of God than contain it. It could be difficult and easy to forget about, but I suppose we would rather catch some glimpses than none.

I leave you with a piece of wisdom that is often attributed to Mayan origins (but the reality may be a bit more complicated than that). It is called *In Lak'ech*. It goes like this: "You are my other me. If I do harm to you, I do harm to myself. If I love and respect you, I love and respect myself."² If God cannot be contained in any one place or any one person, then you really *are* my other me, because God is found equally in both of us and in all places that we go. God cannot be contained because we do not get to reduce God to something we can control or own. God doesn't belong to us, but we all get to live with God in all places and in all living things. "You are my other me. If I do harm to you, I do harm to myself. If I love and respect you, I love and respect myself." May we make it so.

²Alonso Monroy Conesa, "The Myth Behind the Mayan 'In lak'ech,'" *Medium*, January 20, 2020, <https://monroyconesa.medium.com/the-myth-behind-the-mayan-in-lakech-e24b33e18c8c> (accessed August 27, 2021).