

Edina Morningside Community Church  
United Church of Christ  
Sunday, August 23, 2015  
Rev. Howard Bell  
*Keeping Covenant*

Both of our scripture texts today speak about the temple in Jerusalem as God's dwelling place. They also both speak about the importance of being in relationship with God, of being in covenant with God. Covenant is not tied to place and exists throughout all time since the creation of our world.

Let us first look at the texts as they speak about the temple. We will then return to the text in regard to our role of keeping covenant with God.

Psalm 84 verse 1 reads:

*"How lovely is your dwelling place,  
O Lord of hosts!"*

Scholars believe that this opening verse was written to response to the Psalmist visit to the temple in Jerusalem.

The setting for our text from I Kings is the very dedication of the temple in Jerusalem following its construction by Solomon. I Kings, Chapter 8, verses 1 and 6 read: *"Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of YHWH to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim."*

In regard to our text from I Kings, Biblical commentator, Debra Mumford says, *"The ark was a symbol of Israel's covenant with God and the presence of God in their midst. Therefore, as it relates to Solomon, the presence of the ark of the covenant at the dedication of the temple served to legitimize his kingship. Under Solomon's leadership, the ark of the covenant would not be housed in a tent. It would be placed in an opulent inner sanctuary of the temple, which took seven years and thousands of forced-labor hours to build.<sup>1</sup> The temple, a physical space for worship and for being in God's presence clearly was critical to the live of the Israelites.*

This past week, our Board of Trustees continued engaging in a process of discernment about what might be desired in order to repair and upgrade our church building. Most of you may have already seen many of the plans that have been and are being considered. The trustees are in covenant with God to lead this church in pursuing the necessary steps in this process. In the coming months, everyone will be invited to hear and see what is being proposed. Everyone will have the opportunity to provide input as well. Most importantly, everyone will be asked to be in a process of discernment. Remember, in last week's sermon I suggested that discernment is more than using our intellect; it also requires us to use wisdom – wisdom that comes only from God.

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).

As a faith community, we will have the opportunity to use our wisdom in considering how important is our temple – our church facility – in bringing us together; in inviting God into our presence; in our capacity to praise and worship God; and in our experience of the love of God. How important is our temple – our church building – in our faith formation and in our ever-deepening relationship with God? How important is our temple – our church building in providing space for our various ministries to be conducted? How important is our temple – our church building – in providing us the space from which springs our outreach and justice ministries?

If the congregation discerns that we need to move forward with the recommended projects, the next critical discernment will be determining how to fund these projects. Given what I have experienced in my nearly four months with you; given what so many of you shared in the history review sessions of what this church has meant to you in your lives; given the excellent lay leadership which is currently in place; given the relatively positive financial status of Edina Morningside Church; given the resources available to us in the various ministries of the United Church of Christ; and the abundance which God provides, I believe it is possible to find a way. I do not mean, in any way, to suggest that this will be an easy task. It will require faith in God, faith in one another, wisdom, courage, and a dramatic shift of our church culture from a culture of scarcity to a culture of abundance. I do believe, with God, all things are possible. It is my hope and prayer that someday soon - certainly in less than seven years and without forced labor - we might be able to more fully proclaim, “How lovely, O God, is your dwelling place here at 4201 Morningside Rd, Edina, MN.” We might also be able to proclaim that God is present here; that we are a faith community committed to a vital future; and that we are committed to fulfilling the mission of Edina Morningside Church as contained in our 2013 approved Mission Statement.

Will you please turn to the back cover of your bulletin, and read with me the full Mission Statement. Just the Mission Statement, we will save the Vision Statement reading for another sermon.

Please join me in unison: ***“At Edina Morningside Community Church, we are building a vibrant home for spiritual exploration and growth, where we care, learn, create, and serve with each other in times of joy and in times of challenge. We warmly welcome people of all backgrounds and beliefs. Together, we deepen our connection with our Creator, and live Christ's commandment to love one another.”***

I do want to be clear, that my message this morning and my interpretation of today's texts – both of which speak of God's dwelling place - do not imply that a church building is required in order to be church. I do not mean to imply that the only way in which this faith community can fulfill its mission is by proceeding with the building projects under consideration. I do believe that part of our discernment process this year needs to include a building assessment. We need to discern if it is feasible for this faith community to continue to operate into a long-term future in our current building if we do not address the repair and upgrade concerns.

As we return to our texts for today, we note that both texts also speak about a relationship between God and God's people that does not require a physical space. In regard to Psalm 84, Biblical commentator David Dark says, "*...we begin with what is certainly a song of praise concerning the temple; but, in no time at all, the concept of the dwelling of God, the house of the Lord, is expanded to somehow include the very space of pilgrimage...*"<sup>2</sup>

Psalm 84 verse 5 reads:

*"Happy are those whose strength is in you,  
in whose heart are the highways to Zion."*

Psalm 84 concludes with these words related to God's covenant:

*No good thing does the Lord withhold  
from those who walk uprightly.  
O Lord of hosts,  
happy is everyone who trusts in you.  
(Psalm 84, vs 11 - 12)*

There is nothing in these versus from today's Psalm that suggests that God can only be experienced in the temple. The Psalmist proclaims that God's strength and heart can be experienced in the highways...in all our walks of life. The psalmist also proclaims that God desires from us that we walk in upright ways and that we place our trust in a personal God.

In the opening words of the prayer of Solomon, we are introduced to Solomon's understanding of his keeping covenant with God. I Kings 8:23 reads: "*YHWH, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart...*"

Covenant is a most important concept for King Solomon. As we heard last week, Solomon sought in all his ways to live up to his father, King David. One of those ways he sought to live up to his father was by building the temple. He suggests on this day of dedication, that the successful completion of the temple is, in fact, evidence that God is fulfilling a covenant that God made with David and with the Israelite people.

What do we, today, think of when we think of keeping covenant with God? The primary dictionary definition of covenant is simply "a solemn agreement". We certainly see ourselves, also, as recipients of God's covenant with Israel since we consider the Israelites our ancestors in the faith. We also experience God sending God's son into the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth as a new covenant that we celebrate in our sacrament of communion, that we affirm through our confirmation process, and that embraces all that we are as people of faith. In both of these covenants, it is important to remember that covenant embraces the concept of relationship. In our relationship with God, not only do

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<sup>2</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Prophets 3-16).

we expect God to keep God's covenant with us – God's solemn promise of unconditional love - we also must keep our covenant – our solemn promises with God. In keeping covenant, we are called be in relationship with God through prayer, we are called to grow in our understanding and in our faith; we are called to walk uprightly, we are called to care for one another and we are called to serve those in need.

In conclusion, it is my hope and prayer that as we move forward this year in the life of this faith community and in the special challenges and opportunities we face during this Interim Ministry Time, we remember to keep covenant with God in all that we are and all that we do. Amen.