



Looking for God at Church

1 Kings 8:1, 22, 30-43

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Transfiguration Sunday

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Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of the city of David, which is Zion.

Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven.

He said, "Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. O hear in heaven your dwelling place. Heed and forgive."

"If someone sins against a neighbor and is given an oath to swear, and comes and swears before your altar in this house, then hear in heaven, and act, and judge your servants, condemning the guilty by bringing their conduct on their own head, and vindicating the righteous by rewarding them according to their righteousness."

"When your people Israel, having sinned against you, are defeated before an enemy but turn again to you, confess your name, pray and plead with you in this house, then hear in heaven, forgive the sin of your people Israel, and bring them again to the land that you gave to their ancestors."

"When heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against you, and then they pray toward this place, confess your name, and turn from their sin, because you punish them, then hear in heaven, and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel, when you teach them the good way in which they should walk; and grant rain on your land, which you have given to your people as an inheritance."

“If there is famine in the land, if there is plague, blight, mildew, locust, or caterpillar; if their enemy besieges them in any of their cities; whatever plague, whatever sickness there is; whatever prayer, whatever plea there is from any individual or from all your people Israel, all knowing the afflictions of their own hearts so that they stretch out their hands toward this house; then hear in heaven your dwelling place, forgive, act, and render to all whose hearts you know—according to all their ways, for only you know what is in every human heart—so that they may fear you all the days that they live in the land that you gave to our ancestors.”

“Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.”

1 Kings 8:1, 22, 30-43

Most of the time we think we are self-sufficient. We figure we can handle anything that comes our way. If our lives are not exactly what we have hoped for, then all we need is a little self-improvement. We will get to the good life through yoga, squash, soul cycling, podcasts, reading, journaling, dairy-free cooking, or the last season of *Game of Thrones*.

All we need is to be more organized. If we are too busy, then we need quality time with our loved ones. If we are overwrought and overweight, then we need a personal trainer that will help us reduce stress and burn fat. If we are tired, then we need a good night's sleep, a weekend trip, or a weeklong trip.

We keep believing that self-fulfillment is right around the corner. We think we are just a step away from making our lives everything we want them to be. But then something happens that lets us know that we are not in control. Someone we love gets sick and we are thrown by how little we can do. A friend dies unexpectedly and we are broken because we cannot do anything.

We lose our self-confidence when we fail when we did not expect to fail. What we thought was a run of bad luck seems to have no end. The sadness you feel about an aging parent stays in the back of your mind. Maybe it is when you realize that your marriage is in trouble, or that the children are not who you thought they were, or when you try to put yourself back together after being abused. The problems that will not go away push us to the depths of our souls.

It is also true that at other times, it is joy that makes us realize that even if it were possible, self-sufficiency would be empty. A child laughs us into a sense of wonder. An elderly woman who refuses to be old makes us smile. A troubled adolescent who finds a better way makes us proud. Or you meet someone else who has never seen *Doctor Who* and does not want to or who agrees with you that Robert Kraft should go to prison just for being Robert Kraft.

Something wonderful happens and you realize that you need someone to thank. Those surprising moments push us away from our mistaken sense of self-sufficiency and throw us into the great Mystery. We are suddenly aware of the Spirit within which we live and move and have our being. We may laugh or cry or hope the longing goes away. We are wondering if God is present even as we wonder at God's presence.

We long for God. We recognize that we are not in control and not alone. What are we supposed to do with our hunger for God, our longing to be loved? Where do we go to look for God? We go to church.

Solomon, Israel's third king, was going to be the fulfillment of God's promises. And for a moment he is all that the people hoped for. Solomon invites everyone to Jerusalem for the dedication of the temple he has built. He parades the Ark of the Covenant—the symbol of God's presence.

When the king prays, he is long-winded, but it is a good prayer: "God, there is no God like you in heaven above or on the earth beneath. We know that you cannot be contained in this sanctuary made with human hands, but when we long for your presence let us come and visit you here. Watch over this sanctuary night and day. Listen to the prayers of your people. If we are accused of doing something we did not do, let us come and know that you will hear our prayer."

"When we are accused of something of which we are guilty, let us come then, too, and know that if we confess our sins, you will forgive us. When we are going into battle, hear our prayers. After we have lost a battle, hear our prayers then, too. When immigrants come from

distant lands, hear their prayers. Open your ears to all of our prayers. Please be here whenever we come looking for you.”

A sanctuary is a place to look for God, but as a French proverb puts it, “The one who is near the church is often far from God.”

We can come to church and forget that it is about God. She walks into the sanctuary just as the Seraph Choir starts singing. The song is about God, but all she can think about is how cute they are.

She makes her way to her seat during the call to worship because she does not want to get stuck in the processional. She finds a spot close to where she sat last time she was here, and the time before, and the time before that. She watches the choir process. The hymn is about God, but all she can think about is how cute they are.

Someone reciting the Lord’s Prayer sounds like the warning voice on the subway, “Stand clear of the closing doors, please.” The choir sings a piece with three thys, a longeth, a fainteth, and a crieth. She likes it when Maggie reads. Maggie could pull off longeth, fainteth, and crieth.

She yawns during the silent prayers. During the passing of the peace she picks out a couple of people to go to, then comes back to her pew and waits for the extroverts to come to her. During the children’s sermon she hopes that a child will have a story about her dog that Julia would rather hear some other time. There is a little chorus at the end of a litany. She is not a fan of little choruses.

She looks at the offering plate to see if anything bigger than a ten made it. The scripture reading is too

long—especially on a day with communion when you are already looking at 12:05. During the sermon she wonders why she has never seen *Doctor Who*. During the Lord's Supper she wishes the cups were bigger. She likes clapping after the postlude because she knows the senior minister does not care for clapping in worship.

She leaves without sharing the pain in her life with God, without thanking God for the joy in her life, and without considering how her life might be better. Some people have been given the impression that worship is something you watch, so they give up on church and take their search for God elsewhere. In the United States worship attendance is dropping even as the number of people who say that they are interested in God is increasing. The church is a gathering of people looking for God. We bring our need for God, praying that the possibility of God becomes an encounter with God.

Near the end of Douglas Coupland's *Life after God* he writes: "Now—here is my secret: I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I will ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me to be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love."

We are here because we share the same secret. We need God. God is the strength that keeps us searching after we are ready to quit. God is forgiveness when we are bitter. God is love that holds us together.

God is here, in this sanctuary, in this church, when we step out of the routine long enough to pray. God is

here when we understand that God is looking for us. God is here when we eat the bread, drink the cup, and worship God.

Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger

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