



## Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

Will God Really Dwell on Earth?

August 23, 2009

The Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kings 8:3-9, 22-30

“But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!” 28

We plan hard for mission trips. We try to guess what all the possible problems will be, then we find solutions or plans for those problems.

We fill out boatloads of forms. We want the parents and high schoolers to know what they will be doing on the trip.

After all the planning we meet at the airport. This June, that was at 4 a.m. The planes were on time. The transfer in Ft. Lauderdale went fine. Customs in San Jose, Costa Rica went great.

Soon we were at Portantorchas Bible School. It's 3 p.m. The sun is out, it's 80 degrees with low humidity. Kids are playing volleyball with the other church, First Presbyterian Church Boise, Idaho.

Life is grand.

Standing in the parking lot at the Bible school, Jorge says we have a problem. On the work site I will be leading with 28 people, they had a mudslide. Part of the hill on which they are building the apartment buildings for the poor moved. Simple. It moved.

Instead of building an apartment building we will dig and build a retaining wall.

Okay...

How bad could it be?

Monday we stood on the worksite as a dump truck – a full-size dump truck – dumped a whole load of rock on the ground. We needed half our group to move that rock pile closer to the edge. The others should go start digging.

Half an hour later the first set of diggers climbed out. They were sweating and covered in mud. They simply shook their heads as they handed us the shovels.

Soon I climbed into the trench. The mud grabbed my boots. It was wading.

Wading through mud.

Dig into the mud, lift, throw. The mud does not come off. It does not come off. At all. Soon each of us had a rock we would scrape the mud onto. Then back into the mud for another load. Scrape. And if you took a wrong step, the mud quickly sucked up to your shin.

Sometimes you could pull your own boot out. Other times a friend would stand next to you and pull you. Or last, they would kneel next to you and dig with their hands so you could pull your foot out.

Meanwhile my \$30 Meijer Dickie boots – not waterproof.

We dug.

The next day the earth had moved in the rains. We dug some more.

There is nothing glamorous about digging in mud.

At the same time, while in the trench, I would break and look up at the wall of dirt above me. Beyond that the building continues on to the apartments.

What if the dirt moves tonight during the rains? It is rainy season in Costa Rica. It will rain tonight. The rain came each day at 3 and rained till 6 or well into the night. It would rain some more. What would the earth do? How big would the mudslide be?

What of the new apartment building?

Isn't this project a true act of charity for the poor and homeless of San Jose? Where is God?

The disciples walking with Jesus once asked him if the Tower of Siloam, which fell and killed some people, fell because those people had sinned. Jesus says the tower fell regardless of our sinfulness. Towers fall. Rain falls on the good and bad alike.

Rain falls.

Solomon has just completed building the first temple for the Lord Almighty. Chapter 8 here is the dedication of the temple. Our reading began with the movement of the Ark of the Covenant into the most holy part of the temple. The Ark was thought to contain the literal stone tablets that Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai with the 10 commandments. The Ark is so holy, one leader touched it and literally died.

Now the Ark is in the first temple built in the center of Jerusalem to give physical glory to an invisible God.

Physical glory to an invisible God.

I would think an apartment complex of four apartment units all built by donations, hard work, mission groups, professional construction workers from Costa Rica plus day laborers from Nicaragua – a true multinational charity project – would give such glory. Yet the rain falls. The mud moves.

And just because the church is involved doesn't mean we are guaranteed supernatural protection. Churches serve God. Churches grow. Churches shrink. Christians serve God. Life goes well. Christians serve God and live goes south as surely as a Costa Rica mud slide.

Illness comes. Heart attacks happen. Cars collide. Lumps form. Pink slips are received. Sales slump.

Rain falls on the good and the bad alike.

Solomon asks, "Will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built?"

Maybe our plans and our understandings of who God is are too small to contain Him?

David Crowder, a worship leader, wonders, "I am sick of gods who are too small."

Solomon's question is our question. "Will God really dwell on earth?" If the highest heaven is too small to contain God, why do we think our mission trip plans, or our church plans, or our family

plans, or our simple faith will be enough to contain God?

Maybe God is too big to be contained?

Maybe, just maybe, we need to be humbled ... humbled and thankful for Jesus, Emmanuel God with us. For without Jesus we have no shot – no prayer – of understanding God.

In Jesus, we have the barest shot, because as a human - and still God - as a human we can maybe ... follow him. Our hope is in Jesus because Solomon's temple cannot contain God. Nothing can contain God. It is the exact opposite. By Jesus God contains – holds – welcomes – loves us.

And how do we experience this love from God? In community. As the family of God.

Tuesday afternoon we started to move rocks. We had bucket brigades to move rock. We would share a board over the mud and pass rocks. For three more days all we did was pass rock. One rock at a time, we passed rocks.

At one point I stood on the berm of mud we had made with our digging and passed rocks. I stood next to Aaron with Dan and Jillian on my other side. And I passed rock. Soon the sophomore girls, Becca, Kelsey, Cory, Anna, and Margaret, along with Max and Chas, were singing T-pain, TI Taylor Swift. The Top 40 live.

We talked. We laughed. We sang. We told stories. We laughed some more. We passed rock. We dropped rocks, splashing mud on each other. We tossed rocks some. Steel-toed boots being the best. We talked, we laughed, we passed rocks.

We filled the chicken wire boxes with 5 dump truck's worth of rock. We filled 8 feet of rock 18 feet long, 12 feet deep.

The wall got taller. At 3 the rain started. And we moved rock.

The rain washed the dirt from our faces.

It washed us, it energized us, it was great to be alive. Maybe the mud would move again tonight. Maybe all our work would be for naught, but we are still God's people. We step down into the mud each day not for glory of our own, but for His glory. We step into the mud for God's glory, because there we are the family of God. We go where we are called. We do what we are asked and we have faith.

Bad stuff will happen. Good stuff will happen.

Will God really dwell on the earth? Wherever the family of God gathers, be it in the church or in the mud of Costa Rica – there you will find God.

There we will find Jesus.

We will find him in you and in me.

Amen.