

A Dwelling Place for God

sermon digest

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Ephesians 2:11-22

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If you have Jewish neighbors and friends, you are probably aware that they are preparing to enter what is probably the most important part of their calendar year. Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the Jewish New Year, is a week from Thursday. Known also by its biblical name, which means literally "day [of] shouting/raising a noise" or the Feast of Trumpets, it usually occurs in the early autumn in our part of the world and is marked by a two-day celebration, which begins on the first day of the Jewish month of Tishrei. It is believed to be the anniversary of the creation of Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, and takes note of humanity's place of responsibility in God's world. God is said to open the books of judgment on all creation and upon each individual on Rosh Hashana. It marks the beginning of the High Holy Days or Days of Awe, ten days of preparation and repentance that come to their climax in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the Jewish year. Torah readings for Rosh Hashanah focus on the stories of Abraham and his expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness and Abraham's binding of Isaac on the altar—thus the customary sounding of the shofar, a hollowed-out ram's horn, recalling the ram in the thicket which saved Isaac's life. The shofar's penetrating sound is repeated throughout the Ten Days of Awe, sounding the call for serious reflection and repentance.

Once in every generation, about once every thirty years, for two or three years in a row, the Jewish month of Tishrei with its High Holy Days coincides with the Muslim observance of Ramadan, the month in which the Quran was revealed and for Muslims, the most holy month of the year. This coincidence of days last happened in 2005, 2006 and 2007. With the Christian observance of the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi and World Communion Sunday falling within the same time frame, it seemed too good an opportunity to ignore. In preparation for the occasion and at a time when religious animosities were worsening around the globe, Rabbi Arthur Waskow, Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister, and Muslim Sufi Murshid Saadi Shakur Chisti joined hands to reflect upon a more hopeful moment in the Abrahamic saga. The result of their efforts, which they entitled *The Tent of Abraham: Stories of Hope and Peace for Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, played on the familiar imagery of Abraham's tent opening in all four directions and sought to draw upon the depths of each of the Abrahamic religions to bolster a tradition of openness and welcome toward those we tend to consider "other." In the words of the authors, it was an effort to "recognize family differences while making family connections." It was an effort "to transform the stories toward a healing of the broken family of Abraham" [*Abraham's Tent*, xvii, 31].

Today, in the wake of the recent Israeli-Palestinian conflict and our own recent observance of the thirteenth anniversary of 9/11, it is fitting that we once again make a concerted effort to remind ourselves that rather than the occasion for erecting walls of hostility, the deep resources of each of the Abrahamic faith traditions call us to the work of constructing paths of peace, not enmity. As Dr. Sayyid Syeed, former head of the Islamic Society of North America, puts it, "When we share our spiritual journeys, even when the stories of our lives are different from each other, we often find their source in the Compassionate One who calls on us to be compassionate."

Christ has reconciled us to God and to one another. The author of Ephesians, whether it be Paul or, as is more likely, someone later writing in Paul's name, would agree with Dr. Syeed. If the hospitality of Abraham and the strong injunction throughout the Torah to extend welcome to the stranger moves us to seek avenues of peace with our distant cousins, how much more, the writer to the Ephesians would say to us, does our encounter of the God who was in Christ. "*Remember*," the writer says to those first century gentile Christians, "what it was like before you knew Christ. *Remember* the sense of separation *you* experienced." Far from Israel's covenants of hope, you had "no hope" and were "without God in the world." *But now* everything has changed, he tells them. "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."

And so what happens now? What happens on moving to the inside? Would it not be repulsive to think that having been embraced and welcomed near by the grace of God in Christ that grace would become the occasion for prejudice and rejection toward others? "He is our peace," the writer says. He has reconciled us to God—yes; but he has also reconciled us to each other. "He has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility *between us*, creating *one new humanity* in place of the two." The writer, the famed theologian Karl Barth once said, was "obviously unable to imagine a peace given by God *to* those far and near which would not also be a peace *between* the two" [Quoted, Craig

McMahan, *Review and Expositor*, Spring 1996, p. 264] . Peace with God necessarily emanates in peace with our neighbor, for as Ronald Goetz puts it,

A Christianity obedient to Christ's peacemaking life, death and resurrection must view each and every human being as one for whom Christ has died. 'Christian' bigotry is simple blasphemy" ["Miracles of Inclusion," *Christian Century*, July 2-9, 1997].

If we would be a dwelling place for God, we must live in the wideness of God's welcome. Be sure to take note. What we are dealing with in our passage this morning is not doctrinal minutia, but pure doxology. As a matter of fact, the Ephesians writer seems to utilize the words of an early Christian hymn in making his case. He makes no effort to explain *how* God's reconciliation in the cross of Christ takes place. He merely celebrates the reality that it does, and that seeing our distant cousin through the lens of that reality draws us to one another. In Christ, the writer says, Jew and gentile are joined together "into a holy temple in the Lord." This new temple, Walter Shurden suggests, is actually

no building at all. It is a much more fragile structure, a much less dependable structure. It is made of the likes of us. We, you and I, are God's temple! What an astounding thought! We are the dwelling place of God! [*Baptist History and Heritage*, March 1, 2005]

Or are we? I can certainly think of times when we were anything but a place where God would choose residence. The times of hunting down and persecuting Jewish people in the fourth century forward when the church enjoyed establishment in the Roman Empire; the vicious Crusades launched by the church in the middle ages, putting Jews and Muslims at the tip of the sword; the pogroms against Jews, the enforced ghettos and finally the Holocaust or Shoah—none of these bore witness to the reconciling God we know in Christ. And even today, when we in the church feel we must degrade either ancient or modern Judaism in order to make room for Christ, we fall miserably, miserably short of the reconciling work of God in Christ.

Amy-Jill Levine is a current day, practicing Jew who is a professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School. Coming from a background of mutual respect and collaboration among Christians and Jews in the Boston area, she spends her days seeking to impart an understanding of the Jewish moorings of Jesus and the faith that takes its point of departure from him. Speaking to a dismal level of ignorance on both sides of the aisle, she bemoans in particular the evident feeling far too many Christians have that they must pillory the Jewish faith in order to embrace Jesus. Rather than acknowledging Jesus as a son and a faithful practitioner of the Jewish faith, which he was, Jesus is depicted as "against" Judaism—against the law, against the Temple, against the people of Israel in general. "Judaism becomes in such discourse a negative foil: whatever Jesus stands for, Judaism isn't it; whatever Jesus is against, Judaism epitomizes the category" [*The Misunderstood Jew*, 19].

Jesus took issue in his lifetime with some manifestations of the faith into which he was born, as did the Apostle Paul after him. Yet some of the strongest words against his Jewish contemporaries were placed on Jesus' lips by his church, reflecting hostilities arising in the decades following his death; and Paul forcefully and decisively denounced any suggestion that God had abandoned the Jews (Romans 9-11). As we read the evangelists' accounts of Jesus in conflict with some of the Jewish leaders of his own day and Paul's angry rhetoric against the "Judaizers," those insisting that gentile Christians must follow all of the dietary and purity minutia of the law, we should remind ourselves that these confrontations with *some* Jews did not signify a rejection of *all* Jews in *all* times and places. Unless we are prepared to assume guilt for the despicable actions of *some* Christians in the Crusades, the Holocaust and the Aryan Nations, we should not condemn *all* Jews, *all* Muslims for the actions of some, despicable those some of those actions should be.

So hear now the word: We who are reconciled to God through Christ are reconciled to our brothers and sisters inside the church and our cousins beyond the church as well. If we would be a dwelling place for God, if we would give evidence that God in Christ indeed is with us, we will be about the task of extending peace and welcome to all of the world that God loves--no exceptions!