

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43

Does God Really Hear Our Prayers?

There is no place like it on earth. The Temple Mount, a hill located in the Old City of Jerusalem, is venerated as a holy place by three world religions, including nearly 60% of the world's population today. For millennia, people have prayed to God on that hill, trusting that something about that place provides a unique connection to God.

And here we read the prayer King Solomon prayed on the day the First Temple of the Hebrew people was dedicated, on that Temple Mount in the ancient city of Jerusalem. Scholars date the Temple dedication to approximately 957 B.C.E. This Temple would be a house of prayer, a place of sacrifice, the center of all national life because it was a symbol of the religious devotion of the Hebrew people to Yahweh, the one God who chose and saved and made covenant with them. It would stand until the destruction of the city by the Babylonians nearly 400 years later. Another Temple was built on the same site 70 years after that. That second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E. And since that time, the Jews have mourned the loss of this holiest of sites, this place where God's name was said to dwell.

But the Jews aren't the only ones to revere this place on earth. Muslim tradition teaches that it was from this spot that Muhammed ascended into heaven, making it their third holiest place after Mecca and Medina. The Muslim shrine known as the Dome of the Rock was built on the Temple Mount before 700 C.E., and stands today as Jerusalem's most recognizable building. Christians, too, honor this place, remembering that at the Temple, Jesus overturned the money-changers' tables and called the people to honor God. Medieval Christians made pilgrimage to this place, and today, many continue to travel to the Holy Land to deepen their faith through physical presence in the places Christ walked.

All of which raises questions. Does sacred history make for a deeper connection between earth and heaven, as on the Temple Mount? Does God hear prayers better when they are raised at holy places? Or—dare we ask it—does God really hear our prayers at all?

Solomon, and the biblical writers who recorded his prayer centuries later, would answer yes to all three questions. Yes, the Temple is a place where God's name, if not God himself, dwelled, so heaven touched earth there. Yes, God's choice of this place and this structure, and the sacrifice and prayer held there, make it the ideal place for effective prayers. Yes, God hears our prayers. Why else would we bother to lift them heavenward?

So he prays for a catalogue of potential situations. His prayer is addressed to God, yet intended to be overheard by the people, a sort of sermon-prayer. He starts with the reality of personal sin, the need for repentance and confession and acceptance of the consequences of sin. Quickly he moves to corporate sin, the sins of the people which will require the same forgiveness from God and new starts. He prays for God's help in times of drought and famine and losses in battle, and he prays that if the people are carried away captive to the land of their enemy, that God will still hear them and maintain their cause. All of these things will happen in the history of Israel. Solomon's prayer has the effect of humbling the people, reminding them of their dependence on God, on this day of celebration when they might have focused instead on the glorious achievements of the past.

And in the middle of these petitions for the people of Israel, he offers a request that not only will God listen to their prayers, but also to the prayers of foreigners offered at this place. This is

important for us to hear. The dominant voice in the Hebrew scriptures affirms the special relationship of the Hebrew people to God, a covenant relationship of love and obedience. Sometimes the story becomes one of drawing inward, closing off encounters with those of other backgrounds and traditions. Yet there is always a voice which looks outward, an inclusive voice which recalls that this tribe, this nation was chosen for the purpose of blessing all the nations of the world. So Solomon asks that God will always hear the prayers of foreigners, “so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel.” (1 Kings 8:43)

If you know anything about the rules for prayer on and around the Temple Mount today, you will quickly see the irony here. Today, there are strictly enforced regulations about who may pray, and how they may pray, on the Temple Mount and at its Western Wall. Centuries of conflict have created today’s current situation, in which the government of Jordan administers the site under a Muslim religious trust, the rules of which are enforced by Israeli police. Only Muslims may pray in the Dome of the Rock. The Western Wall, which is what remains of a retaining wall which surrounded the Temple Mount before its destruction by the Romans, was named a place of prayer for Jews by the Muslim Sultan Suleiman in the mid-16th century. In the 20th century, it became the focal point for prayer by Jews, and the religious custom of inserting written prayers in its cracks was revived. Yet, sadly, prayer at this sacred space continues to be a source of controversy, as in recent years Orthodox Jews and modern Jews have clashed over where and when women or mixed-gender groups may pray at the Wall.

God’s heart breaks at all this, I am convinced.

I was fully aware as I prepared for this sermon that I haven’t been to Jerusalem, I know what I know only second- or third-hand, and that people have both strong and tender feelings about politics and prayer in this sacred landscape. Then I saw that my friend and colleague in ministry Rabbi Ed Stafman would be here with the performance workshop, and I knew what I would say would matter to him—a lot! Our words, like Solomon’s words, are freighted by history and faith. We struggle to understand one another and to live God’s way in the world. Our words strain to speak truth, the desires of God’s heart—and isn’t that a definition of prayer? Straining to speak God’s desires, asking for God to be there, for God’s will to be manifest in this fractured, confounding world God loves?

For centuries, the faithful have followed the plea of the Psalmist, “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!” (Psalm 122:6), wondering when that prayer would ever be fulfilled. Yet we keep praying, as if we believe God hears us. I’m not willing to give that up. Despite the headlines, everyday in Jerusalem, peace can be found. Families love, children grow, neighbors care for one another, people find healing and hope, and people of varied faiths and no faith are at work for justice. In many ways, Jerusalem is no different from any other city in the world. We see answers to our prayers to the extent that our faith gives us sight. It’s a circular relationship: we pray because we believe, and we believe because we pray. We strain to give voice to the prayers God places on our hearts, and God uses us to answer those prayers. Peace comes to Jerusalem, and to the places where we live, as we allow ourselves to be used by God for peace. Prayer changes things. Most of all, prayer changes the one who prays. So yes, God really hears our prayers. Keep on praying.

Our second question is this: Does God hear prayers better when they are raised at holy places? As Christians, we believe that in Christ God has sanctified the whole world. There is no place inherently more sacred than another. We can pray to God in a closet or a cathedral, under a cross or under the stars, in the middle of the ocean, in the desert, or on a mountaintop. Many of us have had special experiences, feelings of closeness to God, in particular places. Those places become holy to us, places to

revisit so as to recall that feeling. Just as in Solomon's day, we dedicate buildings to be places where God's name dwells, and we cherish those spaces. We are physical beings, who need physical spaces.

But what works for you won't necessarily work for me, and vice versa. What makes a place holy is shared experience, so it's not just me or just you, but something we've done together. And here's where history comes in. In Christian tradition, we call it the "communion of saints," the bond between us and those who have gone before and will come after, those to whom we are joined not by time or place but by mystical union. God hears prayers raised at holy places because they are voiced by many, and thus become a closer approximation of God's voice. My prayer adds to yours, your prayer refines mine, his prayer corrects ours, her prayer distills ours. Together, we pray closer to God's heart. Middle East scholar F.M. Loewenberg writes of the Western Wall, "Even if this place was not intrinsically holy . . . it has become sanctified over time as Jews have increasingly utilized it for prayer."

(<https://www.meforum.org/articles/2017/is-the-western-wall-judaisms-holiest-site>)

And so it is true that sacred history draws earth closer to heaven, heaven closer to earth. God was never confined to the Temple, the mystical language Solomon used to approximate experience there was never definitive, God was in the cloud and in the fire and in the Holy of Holies, but the fullness of God was never restricted to these spaces. God's name lived there, a claim that this was God's place—but it's just as true that the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it. In the lived faith of God's people, earth and heaven become one.

So I wish to share with you a testimony of how this ancient story of holy place and prayer is still lived today. A young member of our congregation, McKinley Hall, had the opportunity to live and work in Jerusalem this summer. She went as a listener, hoping to get a better understanding of today's realities, and returned filled with people's stories and perspectives, perhaps more confused than when she left because the more she listened, the less of a single story she could hear. In the middle of July, on *Tisha B'Av*, the day when Jews mark the destruction of the second Temple, she went to the Western Wall, and there she put her prayer into the wall. One prayer among thousands that day alone, joining her with God's heart and God's people. Her prayer that day was in remembrance of a Jewish friend from Bozeman who died by suicide, and for other transgender youth facing challenges in their lives. It was a powerful experience for her, a holy one, and she wrote to me at the time,

I hope that you can share with the congregation the power of our interfaith network, the power of acceptance, and thank them for raising me in a community of faith, but also a community of learning, which has allowed me to appreciate the diversity of God's world.

(McKinley Hall, email, 7/22/2018)

Does God really hear our prayers? Yes. God does. Does the place we pray them matter? Maybe not so much to God, but it does matter to us. Does it matter that we pray together? Absolutely. Even when our voices are not synchronized, or in complete harmony, God draws us together when we seek to pray as one.

Solomon finished his prayer with these words.

Blessed be the LORD, who has given rest to his people Israel according to all that he promised. . . . Let these words of mine . . . be near to the LORD our God day and night. . . so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no other.
(1 Kings 8:56-60)

Thank God for the gift of prayer. Let's do it.