

## Where Do You Dwell?

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Where do you dwell? Physically, we tend to put our bodies in places that feel comfortable. We are creatures of habit. I mean, look at where you're sitting now. How many of us would come into church and sit on the other side? Shocking thought! As dedicated as we are to the comfort and safety of our physical bodies, I'm not sure we give the same priority to our internal selves. Where do you dwell? Social media? Politics? Culture wars? Family crises? Financial concerns? Relationships? Why do we allow our bodies a place of refuge, but leave our minds and hearts to weather stress and exhaustion without reprieve? Have any of us have brought our whole selves to this morning's refuge in worship or are our minds already on this afternoon's chores or still worried over what happened last week?

Psalm 91 speaks of God as a dwelling place. The psalmist uses the rich imagery of God as a shelter, a refuge, a stronghold, and a habitation. Through this lens, God is not a distant, angry, cold, reserved deity, but a sanctuary, a safe place to run when life feels exhausting and out of control. God is the one to whom our heart's attention can be gratefully drawn when it isn't being pulled to the needs of the moment. This type of intimacy is built over time, through experiences. This Psalm is not a lecture, it's more like a love song. It isn't laying out an instruction manual for how one ought to engage in religious practice. Rather, it displays the way it feels to experience God as our most natural dwelling place.

For anyone who has an experience with another person like this, someone who feels like a refuge, you know that this type of intimacy emerges from shared experiences. And those experiences often lead us to name people in affectionate ways. Many have pet names for their partners and children, reflecting the way they feel about one another or experiences they have shared. Naming is a powerful part of the human experience. Naming things is a

way of claiming personal identification them. In ancient times, people and places were given names for reasons that reflected their unique identity. Native people throughout the world continue this practice, often changing names at significant moments in life reflecting noteworthy experiences, claiming a new of being known by others.

You might not have noticed, but today's Psalm uses five different names for God. Among all the psalmist's descriptions of God being a refuge, he names God in five different ways. Each of those names represents something significant about God's identity and the Psalmist's relationship with God. "He who dwells in the shelter of the MOST HIGH, abides under the shadow of the ALMIGHTY. He shall say to the LORD, 'you are my refuge, my stronghold, my GOD in whom I put my trust'". For us, it blends together. We aren't reading it in the original language, so it all sounds the same to us, but the Jewish people had given God these distinct names based on specific encounters that reminded them of those experiences. Reading this Psalm, for them, would have been like us reciting various nicknames we'd given a friend throughout a lifetime of travels, joys, heartbreaks, and adventures.

Consider what it is like to dwell in a shelter. This shelter is El Elyon, the MOST HIGH. El Elyon refers to God's supreme authority and sovereignty. Because God is supreme as MOST HIGH, there is utter security within that shelter. Nothing can penetrate where the MOST HIGH El Elyon protects.

Consider what it is, in the threatening heat of the desert sun, to dwell under the shade. That shade is El Shaddai, the ALMIGHTY. El Shaddai is associated with God's power to provide. The Almighty is the provider because the might of God sees and is powerful enough to provide for every need, including shade from the heat of the sun.

Consider what it is, in war, to exist behind the impenetrable walls of a stronghold. Those walls are Yahweh, the LORD. Yahweh describes the covenant relationship God has with

Israel. Yahweh is the most frequently used name of God in the Bible because it describes the faithful determination of God whose loving care endures through every human failure. Consider what it is to exist through the threat of human violence and bodily plague. Elohim is the GOD in whom we trust. Elohim is the plural name for God describing God as our source, the creator, ruler, and ultimate judge. Because God created and will ultimately judge the world, we can be confident in our vindication because God desires life and flourishing for all that has been created.

And, finally, the very last verse in the Psalm names God as Yeshua, our salvation.

All these names reflect the relationship God has with the Hebrews through shared experiences over time. All these names are found in a few short verses but derive from thousands of years of history. Remembering that history, recalling the stories, and leaning into those memories is an essential way of maintaining the ongoing relationship with God as our habitation, our dwelling. We do this with our friends. You remember the time when we went to that place and did that thing? We laugh together or cry, which builds the bond between us, and we recall how much we love being with each other.

Before God's people entered the Promised Land, a yearly series of festivals were instituted. Today's reading from Deuteronomy described the Feast of Firstfruits. The liturgy outlined in this chapter includes, not just a sacrifice, but a narrative retelling of the way the people had experienced God. Yearly they were to remember together God's provision for them in Egypt, and then how they became slaves and the suffering they experienced before God freed them and delivered them. They were to remember how "the **Lord** Your **God**" ... Yahweh, the Covenant Keeper, your Elohim, Creator and source.... Had been with them as they had been the chosen people of God, and then slaves, and then immigrants, and finally citizens, and landowners. This yearly retelling of their story didn't hide the pain they had experienced, the silence and alienation they had felt from God. But it highlighted God's faithfulness through it all so they could celebrate together the complexity and depth

and trust that had eventually been built with God. They were commanded to hold this festival, to remind themselves and one another who God was, where they had come from, and God's presence as a refuge and dwelling place through it all.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Many of us are already working away at the spiritual practices we feel called to undertake during this season. Lent is part of the Christian church's cycle of remembrances. Unfortunately, Lent often gets framed as a way to remove ourselves from God and clean ourselves up before coming into God's presence at Easter. Our spiritual disciplines, because they require a degree of self-denial, can appear as cold and stoic distancing of ourselves from the warmth and comfort of intimacy with God. Please hear me say that is NOT the goal! Pain for the sake of pain will only make our hearts hard. Spiritual practice apart from intimacy with God was THE thing the prophets continually warned God's people to avoid. Instead, let us consider the example of Jesus.

Jesus went into the wilderness before beginning his public ministry. Our translation says he went to be tempted, but the Greek says he was tested. This testing was designed by God to prove Jesus' resolve. Think of it like quizzing oneself on flashcards before taking the final exam. The questions posed by the devil weren't surprises, Jesus had put himself in a position to have his vulnerabilities tested before engaging the ministry to which God had called him. His time in prayer prepared him to understand God's purposes so that his responses proved his alignment with God's mission. That is the purpose of spiritual discipline. Jesus made God his safe place, his refuge and his habitation. He drew near to the heart of God, by neglecting his own desires, and found God's presence to not be merely sustaining but empowering for the work to which he was called. Jesus chose to cultivate his relationship with God by dwelling with God.

As we prioritize and engage spiritual practices this Lenten season, may we draw near to the heart of God, choosing to dwell in and with God, recalling our experiences of God in

the past, maybe claiming our own special names for God, and preparing ourselves to live into the call from God for our future.