

The God Who Dwells
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras
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1 Kings 8:1-13

This summer I had a chance to ascend again to the top of Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park in the great state of Maine. Which, in normal weather, I know to be breathtakingly beautiful. So cool and refreshing.

On a clear day you can see all the way over the town of Bar Harbor, as the fishing boats and cruise ships enter Frenchman's Bay. There's green, low-lying wild blueberry bushes and beautiful rock outcrops. Pristine. An example of the bright and beautiful glory of God's world all around us.

But that's not how I'd describe it last July, when climbing the park loop in a 15 passenger van full of high school and college students, on a break from their mission trip volunteer work.

No, on that day, we found ourselves engulfed in a fog so thick that I could hardly see 6 feet in front of us as I drove. No scenic outlooks. No great vantages. Not even a WIFI signal to pull up a picture of just how beautiful it usually was.

And as we came into the empty parking lot to get out of our vehicles, the clouds closed in. Suddenly, it became very cold, even in the summertime. We began to bundle up, to put on layers, finding trash bags and blankets and whatever we could to cover ourselves. We stayed together in small groups and ventured out onto the visitor trails to see if there was anything we could see. It was so overcast that we couldn't even pick the sun out of the sky, we just hoped and prayed that it was still there. It was spooky. And a little frightening.

I tried to shine a flashlight for better visibility, but it did no good. All we could do was look straight down at our feet, and hold each other's hands and feel our way forward, scrambling over rocks to get where we needed to go. And it was wet, as if it was raining all around us instead of just misting on our faces. We were living inside a cloud. It was beautiful and mysterious. And more than a little disarming.

And so we lived together there at the summit for an hour or so, gathered up with each other for safety and warmth. We watched out for each other. And we made it down the mountain, all safe and accounted for, but I didn't sleep too well that night because the experience felt so incredibly raw.

Who is this God who dwells in darkness?

The story of the dedication of the Temple retells the moment when the Ark was brought to rest in the holy city of Jerusalem. Solomon's father King David had wanted to build it, both to honor God and to consolidate political power for the Anointed King. But God had come to David to say it is not for you to build the temple, it is for your son, your heir, and I through him I will establish your line forever.

So, Solomon labors for seven years to build the most amazing structure, so beautifully crafted. And when it is completed, the Ark is brought in. By bringing the Ark into the temple, the people are celebrating the fulfillment of centuries of promise - more than 400 years of promise - from the time of the Exodus when God guided the people out of Egypt, following a cloud of smoke and fire through the wilderness, to when the 10 commandments and the law were given on Mount Sinai, then later when instructions were given about how to build the Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle that would house it.

The people have followed this Ark through the wilderness, wandering, warring, laboring, farming, building homes and a new nation in the land that was promised centuries before to their patriarchs Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. And finally, after all this time, it has come to rest in the established city of God, the City of David, Jerusalem.

This is the high moment for the people of Israel, not only for Solomon's reign, or for David's descendants, but for all the people. This is the moment. Everything is ordered correctly, planned perfectly. The gold, the spices, the incense, the vestments, the rituals, the words, the presence of the king, everything is as it should be at this very special point in time.

And at the culmination of this ceremony, when the priestly act has been fulfilled and they begin to leave the holiest place in their world, the presence of God descends like a cloud and fills the space.

Consumes it. Overwhelms it. And the priests are unable to continue. All of this pomp and circumstance that has been planned for months, all of this that has been built over the years, all that has been sacrificed and worked for and promised for centuries. All of it – stopped - so much so that the people cannot even move.

They're in the darkness of the cloud. They see a light shining, a light that's undefined, that has no figure. They cannot describe it as anything other than the glory of God shining in the darkness and they stand there in the presence of the Holy One unable to move or speak or sing.

God has shown the people who God is, and what God is like.

Because before there was ever even an Ark, before the law was given and placed in this holy vessel, there was a cloud leading the people through the wilderness.

And before there was ever even a people, or an understanding of where to find the promised land, there was a Spirit moving over dark waters.

The one who precedes us, who overwhelms us, who is beyond our understanding, who is beyond our knowledge and our vision, but who nonetheless forms us and creates us and guides us, now affirms that the building of the temple is right. By filling it.

And when God fills the temple, it is as if God is saying *"I am here. Just as I promised you I would be. I'm stopping the ceremony. I'm overwhelming your understanding. I'm bringing you to a halt. So that you pay attention. To show you that I am here with you."*

Think of a time of success when you have done something so right, you've done something so well.

The moment when you get a promotion,
or you sign the papers on a new house,
or you bring your new child home from the hospital.

Think of the satisfaction you feel creating a community you have built, remember your graduation,
or your retirement,
the recognition of the fulfillment of a lifetime of work.

Solomon is at that very moment of success for himself and his family, his father and his people. This is the fulfillment of everything he could have imagined or dreamed. And at that moment of greatest success, a cloud of darkness overwhelms, bringing with it a moment of doubt...

have I done the right thing?

Where do I go from here?

Will I succeed again?

Who am I in the grand scheme of all of this?

Sometimes when we reach the pinnacle of our life's work, what greets us is self-doubt and even despair. Something that threatens to paralyze us and stops us in our tracks.

But we've done what we were asked.

We've done exactly what God required of us, so why do we not feel elation?

Why do we feel so overwhelmed

Or reminded of our mortality?

Maybe it is just a reminder that this... all of this... is not really about us at all, but about something far greater than us.

And through that darkness of worry and doubt, a light still shines.

And when the fog finally lifts, there's a friend standing there

A friend who cannot possibly be God. It's just a man.

And He says, *"Well done. You've seen something. Now follow me. We've got a little further to go."*

God does not stop, and God does not rest.

And if we are the people who follow God through the wilderness out of Egypt, the ones who have fought and labored and built and now celebrate... if we are the ones who have followed God's cloud, get ready. Because this cloud is going to keep moving.

God is not contained, and the people of God are not contained either.

This Meetinghouse has been built and rebuilt and the presence of God fills it. I can feel it. You can feel it. We can feel it.

And the message is - well done. Now follow. We have a little further to go. Amen.