

Chapter 1 The Promise of God's presence

The promise of God's presence is fulfilled. According to Matthew, that is how the Gospel begins. In interpreting the meaning of the angel's declaration to Joseph that Mary would bear a son to be named "Jesus," Matthew states all this took place to fulfill the promise recorded in the prophecy of Isaiah: the one to be born of the virgin will be called Immanuel, which means "God with us." Pulling back the curtain on the drama of God's redemption through Jesus, Matthew points to how the one who will save is *God with us*.¹

Neither the promise nor the fulfillment came out of the blue. The prospect of God's presence is woven throughout the Old Testament.² One important strand of this notion deals with the worship buildings that served as meeting places between God and God's people. First, there was the portable tent-sanctuary commissioned by God and constructed by the Israelites under the supervision of Moses. It was known by several names, like tent and sanctuary, but most frequently as the dwelling place or tabernacle (Exodus 25). It was also known as the tent of meeting (Exodus 27:21) because it was the place where God convened with his people.

The tabernacle proper was divided into two rooms by a veil. The outermost room was the Holy Place. In it stood a lamp stand, an altar of incense, and a table holding the bread of the presence. This bread was a fresh loaf symbolizing the meal of covenant fellowship between the tribes of Israel and the Lord their God. The inner room was the

¹Matthew 1:20-23. See Isaiah 7:14.

²In this chapter I am dependent upon the insights of Andrew E. Hill, *Enter His Courts with Praise! Old Testament Worship for the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993) and David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

Most Holy Place. It contained the Ark of the Covenant, perhaps the most sacred focus for the early Israelites. Made of pure gold, the ark was crowned with an atonement cover also made from gold. Two cherubim were located on either end of the cover. Between the two cherubim, God promised to meet with Moses and give him the commands for Israel.

The purpose of this tabernacle was to be a dwelling place for God so that he might live in the midst of his people. It was not primarily a gathering place for the people although it did function as a worship center to gather where God dwelt. It was portable so that God's dwelling place might move as the people journeyed closer to the land of covenant promise, their permanent home. The cloud of the glory of the Lord alternated between filling the tabernacle and guiding the Israelites in the stages of their desert trek to Canaan (Exodus 40:34-38).

There was a formative element, too, as the people learned to live with God in their midst. As Andrew Hill point out, the tabernacle was a "life-sized object lesson in the middle of the Israelite camp" instructing in God's holiness, transcendence, immanence, wrath, mercy, justice, and grace.³ With this place of God's presence in their midst, the people were to be reformed according to God's character.

The building of the temple by Solomon continued to connect God's presence to a place of worship. The basic floor plan was the same as the tabernacle. Beyond the entrance to the temple were the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. Upon completing the Temple, Solomon had the Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle furniture installed in the new sanctuary. When the priests had deposited the Ark and left the Holy Place, the cloud of God's glory filled the new temple, symbolizing God's living presence among his

³Hill, *Enter His Courts*, 173.

covenant people, Israel (I Kings 8:10). Solomon thought he had built a place for God to dwell forever. (Things were never quite that static, however. The fate of the temple and the sense of God's presence rose and fell in accordance with the covenant obedience, or lack therefore, of God's people, particularly the ruling royal family.)

The tabernacle and the temple had similar purposes. One was the basic idea for these structures. They provided a dwelling place where God might live with his people. Similarly, the design, construction, and activity in them reinforced certain notions of what having this divine presence in the community's midst might mean. For one thing, there were boundaries—the process of admission by degrees—establishing a tension between God's transcendence and immanence. There were limits imposed on approaching the key locus of God's presence, too. God's holiness required cleansing and purity on the part of the worshipers. Indeed, direct entrance into God's presence required mediation. A priest was needed to cross that threshold.

While the temple had several connections to the tabernacle, it also reflected theological developments. With the tabernacle, God's presence was nomadic, visibly moving with the people in their journeys and maintaining God's dwelling in the midst of the people wherever they roamed. With the temple, a new concern emerges: God's presence as a fulfillment of the promises to the great king David regarding a perpetual royal dynasty (compare I Kings 8:14ff.).

The temple revealed other theological themes, too. One was an inclusive vision of the temple as a house of prayer for all people. It could serve as a witness to the sovereignty of God over all creation as well as a token of the election of Israel. The permanence of the temple also spoke to what the Israelites hoped was a stable residence

in the Promised Land. God was installed as they were installed in the land. The temple was viewed as a testimony to God's faithfulness to grant them rest in that land.

There was potential danger in this way of thinking. As Andrew Hill describes it, by the time of the prophet Jeremiah (ca. 627-580), the temple had become a kind of fetish or talisman for the people of Judah (Jeremiah 7:1-11). For some, the temple was no longer a symbol of God's divine presence and a monument to his sovereignty, rather the temple was now rather mechanically equated with God's automatic presence. It was regarded as the ultimate spirituality reality by some Hebrews. This presumption led them to rely upon it for protection and security. If we possess the temple, some thought, no outside power should be able to destroy us and the city that contains God's dwelling place.

The exile of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem collapsed this house of cards. God's dwelling among his people was by choice, not necessity. It was a gift, not a cause for presumption. The first temple was destroyed at the time of the exile. After the people returned, it was rebuilt with great difficulty. Later it was rebuilt by King Herod in the century before the birth of Christ. Although this last temple was architecturally stunning, there is no record of any visible demonstration of the presence of God returning to reside after either the first or second rebuildings. Thus an expectation, expressed by the prophet Malachi (3:1), began to grow that the Lord would one day return to the temple.

According to the apostles, this expectation was fulfilled. Not only did the Lord return to the temple, but the Lord returned as a new temple and tabernacle. This expansion of the vision of how God would be present among his people is perhaps one of the most significant shifts in how the apostles speak of the divine presence. The prior

tabernacle and temple language is still used, but it has become attached to Christ and the people who are in him. Architectural terms become biographical terms as the divine presence becomes personified in Jesus Christ and those who are in him. The tabernacle and the temple, the loci for God's presence and venues for encounter, are no longer buildings or places, but a person.⁴

This shift can explain some rather cryptic statements. Consider the one in John 1:51. Responding to Nathanael's declaration that Jesus is the Son of God and the King of Israel, Christ states, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (NIV). What is he talking about with all the comings and goings of angels? Jesus is applying to himself the story of Jacob's encounter with God at Haran (Genesis 28:10ff). There Jacob had heard God. Out of awe he named the place Bethel (house of God), declaring that the Lord was in that place and that it was the gate of heaven. By appropriating the story for himself, Jesus is disclosing himself as the new house of God, a new stairway and gate to heaven. Do you want to know where to see God revealed and where to hear his word of promise? "Do not look for a place," Jesus in effect says, "look to me."

Thus it is not unusual to see tabernacle and temple language applied to Jesus, particularly with reference to his having a human body. John 1:14, for example, speaks of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. The original Greek word for dwell in this verse is a play on the word for tent. It is the same word that is used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament upon which New Testament writers tended to rely) for the tabernacle, the tent of meeting described above. Again,

⁴For a detailed theological analysis, see Yves M.J. Congar, *The Mystery of the Temple* (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1958).

architectural terms have become biographical terms as the Word became flesh, tabernacled among humans, and giving them a chance to see his glory in fulfillment of prophetic expectations.

Similarly, Jesus becomes the new temple. In John 2:19ff, Jesus states that, if the temple built by Herod was destroyed, he could build another one in three days. The response that he got was not unexpected. It took forty-six years to build such an architectural masterpiece, the people responded. How could Jesus do it in three days? It was only after his resurrection—after he had been in the grave three days—that his followers realized that Jesus had not been speaking about a building but about his body. The resurrected body of Jesus was the new temple.

The importance of Christ's body is critical. David Peterson, for example, links Jesus' real coming in flesh as the locus of God's presence to a greater revelation of the glory of God. According to Peterson, the gospel of John indicates that the glory of God is ultimately manifested in the death of Jesus on behalf of God's people so that he might raise them up to share the new life of the kingdom with him. The Incarnation (the Word becoming flesh) makes possible a manifestation of the glory of God surpassing anything experienced in the Old Testament. The old temple stood for the revelation of God and purification of the people. It was both the meeting place of heaven and earth and the place of sacrifice for purification from sin. Jesus' body accomplishes these aspirations even more completely, both in its crucified and resurrected states.

This embodiment of God's presence in Jesus—the revealing of God and the opportunity to encounter God's presence in the truly fleshy Jesus Christ—gives the proper context for understanding the often quoted passage from John 4:21ff.

Encountering a Samaritan woman, who asked him about the proper place of worship (either on that mountain or at the temple mount in Jerusalem), Jesus replied that true worshipers will worship God the Father in spirit and in truth (John 4:23). This will happen in a time that is coming and has now come. Rather than seeing Jesus' statement as some open-ended, generic reference to the kind of worship pleasing to God, a better approach is to allow the gospel's other worship-oriented passages to shape the reading here. Notice the context for the statement: the initial concern is about the place of God's presence and the location of encounter in worship. What would we expect Jesus to do after the other Scriptures in this Gospel which have pointed to him as a new Bethel, tabernacle, and temple? If the initial question is about the place of worship, Jesus is likely to point to himself. The subtle key is the mention of a time that is coming and has now come. For Jesus, this is self-referential. According to Peterson,

In the fourth gospel the coming 'time' or 'hour' signifies the hour of his death, resurrection and return to the Father. With these events the new temple is raised up and then the Spirit is given. But even before the cross, the period of true worship is present and operating in advance in the person and ministry of Jesus. Such worship (in spirit and truth) can take place only through him, since he is the ultimate temple.⁵

Worship in spirit and in truth means worship in and through Christ. If true worship is related to Jesus, then worship in spirit should not be read as meaning non-physical worship or worship not concerned with physical things. Remember that it is the body of Christ, a true body, which is the new temple.

Amazingly, the apostles modulate this truth to another level. They apply Old Testament language of places of divine presence in worship not only to Christ but also to Christians, too. The Apostle Paul, for example, makes a clear statement about God's

⁵Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 98.

presence being manifest in Christian worship. He countenances an unbeliever or inquirer being convicted during worship. The person would fall down, worship, and exclaim, “God is really among you!” (NIV; I Corinthians 14:25) The way Paul frames this affirmation hints at Old Testament prophecy about the coming of the nations to pay homage to the true God.

An even clearer application of Old Testament terms to Christians occurs elsewhere in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Hoping to awaken them to the real danger in their internal divisiveness, Paul asks, “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him; for God’s temple is sacred, and you are that temple” (NIV; I Corinthians 3:16-17). His point is clear: arguments and divisions are forms of vandalism against the new locus of God’s presence, which is the church.

Paul can use this same notion—that the church is a new temple for God—to press home other points, too. In II Corinthians 6:14-16, he transfers older worship language to Christian relationships and behavior. We are the temple of the living God. Thus a sanctified life is the worship appropriate to this new temple. In Ephesians 2:19-22, the image is similar but the point is different. In this passage, Paul envisions the church as a “holy temple in the Lord,” put together to be a “dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” with Jesus Christ as the “chief cornerstone.” His rhetorical point is an inclusive vision for the church: all God’s people are built into this new home for God.

And that brings us full circle to where this chapter began. Christians no longer should look solely to any place or building to find the dwelling place of God or the place of encounter with his presence. The promise of Immanuel has been fulfilled in Jesus

Christ. He is God-with-us according to the Gospel of Matthew (1:22-23). Not surprisingly, the last statement from the mouth of the resurrected Christ is a promise of continued presence: “I am with you always.” (Matthew 28:20).

This book will explore these basic notions and what impact they should have on how a church worships: Jesus Christ, through his Incarnation and Resurrection, is the focal point for God’s dwelling among humans. An embodied Savior is where we encounter the presence of God. That has not changed even since the Ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven. The same Holy Spirit which once anointed him now fills the church, enabling us to be “in him.” By the Resurrection and outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the church is the Body of Christ.

Does this have implications for Christian worship? Of course it does. The remainder of this book will explore what bodily encounter with God’s presence means. At this point, let it suffice for us to affirm this basic method of thinking: a theology of Christian worship should be rooted in who Jesus Christ is and in considering Christ and his Body (the church) together. That will be our launching point.

Discussion question:

Where have you experienced the presence of God in worship? Make a list. Are there any interrelated dynamics or common features in your experience?