

Sermon for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost 165th Anniversary

Text: I Kings 8:27-30

27 "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! 28 Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O Lord my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, 29 that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place. 30 And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.



Mount Zion - A Place of Worship - A Place of Prayer

Up on this hill we call this Ebenezer Lutheran Church, Port Hudson. We celebrate 165 years of God's grace. Ebenezer, literally means "The Stone of Help." The Lord has helped us in the past and promises to never leave us as go forward in His name.

As this hill is called Ebenezer, the hill in the Old Testament

was called Mt. Zion. In a sense we can call our hill Mount Zion. For this is where our Lord dwells with us richly in Word and Sacrament. It is where His glory dwells.

Zion. It is a name that has more uses than almost any other, and less is clearly understood about "Zion" because of the multiplicity of possible meanings. In the Bible, it can refer to the hill on which the Temple was built, the people of Israel of Old Testament times, the whole people of God - the Church, or, finally, heaven. In a sense, the meanings are all one, or they all share in the one sense of Zion as the place of the abode of God among men. It could be the Temple of Old, or dwelling in His people, or Heaven, where He will dwell among us eternally. Linguistically, Zion can be confusing.

Tonight we visit Mount Zion. We visit the hill upon which the Temple was built in the days of King Solomon. We will not waste time of the bricks and timbers - they are not there any longer, and they were, after all, just the stuff of which the building was built. We want to look deeper, look into the meaning of the building and the message of Mount Zion for us tonight.

Solomon built the house of the Lord. What he built was not the single place where God was to be found. Our text says, "The LORD has said that He would dwell in the thick cloud." Solomon built a house, the Temple, on Mount Zion to be the place where men could look and be certain that God was among them, that He cared about them, where they knew that He would hear their prayers. It was a place for worship and place for prayer. But it never was the only place where God was. "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain Thee, how much less this house which I have built!"

Mount Zion was the sign that God wanted to be with man - and among men - and intimately involved with mankind. He did not need the sign; He had already given man His Word. He had worked miracles, walked among men, led the Chosen People by the pillar of cloud and fire, and given them their hearts' desire in the Promised Land. Every day God was busy with sunshine and rain and growing plants and feeding His people - and the whole cast of life on earth which He sustained for the purposes of and blessing of His people. God should have been clearly seen and understood to be there and to care. Romans 1:19 and 20 say, "that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made."

God did not need the sign, but we human beings did. Once God stopped doing daily miracles - feeding His people with Manna and lighting up the sky each night with the pillar of fire - His people began to lose the sense of God's presence and immediacy. When they could not see signs of His presence, He no longer seemed to them as attentive or available as He had been. They also imagined that they could do what ought not to be done without drawing notice from God.

We tend to think that way too, at times. What difference does it make? Is the question we often hear, and sometimes speak ourselves? The best answer is to ask the questioner the same question: What difference does it make? Why is it so hard to do what is right? Why are we drawn away from doing what is clearly proper, good, right, moral? Why do we feel compelled to stop doing what we have always done, and start doing something else?

The answer often is that we have lost the sense of God's presence. We imagine that we can do what we wish and God will not notice, or God will not care. We have begun to take notice of the creation, the size of it, the complexity of it, the diversity within it, and have begun to feel insignificant and small. Why would God listen to me? How could I imagine that God would care about someone so insignificant as I am? Where do I get off thinking that my ideas and my religion and my theology is right and everyone who differs from me is wrong?

We need the sign of Mount Zion! Solomon built the house of God for a sign for the children of Israel, and for us. "I have surely built Thee a lofty house, a place for Thy dwelling forever." It was a visible assurance that God was with us and God was among us. It provided something for our senses to fasten onto and remind us that God is really with us, and that God cares about us, and that when we pray, God hears us. Solomon expressed that goal in his prayer, when he said "Lord God, I built this house so that Thine eyes may be open to-ward this house night and day, toward the place of which Thou hast said, 'My name shall be there.' to listen to the prayer which Thy servant shall pray toward this place. And listen to the supplication of Thy servant and of Thy people Israel, when they pray toward this place; hear Thou in heaven Thy dwelling place."

The house of the Lord also provided a focal point for worship. This is where the people came to give gifts to the Lord. The beauty of the house and its ornaments were a visible testimony of the devotion and worship of the people of God. Of course, they forgot what they were doing, and what the house was about, over time, but it was to be that focal point and for the purpose of that testimony originally. And when they forgot what Mount Zion was about, God took

it away from them - first in the Babylonian Captivity with the destruction of the temple, and then at the dawn of the Christian Church, with the destruction of the temple.

Our churches do not give us that visible reminder, at least not in the way the Temple of Mount Zion did. The temple was unique. Our churches are insignificant little buildings in a world filled with grand temples, both pagan and Christian, and huge and glorious churches of every stripe and affiliation. We here in Port Hudson of 165 years are not unique as to the God we worship, as those who worshiped in the temple were, and we have grown used to ignoring our churches most of the time - they are not the center of our lives or communities any longer. But how we decorate them and use them still reflects our love for our Lord.

Which is frightening, really. Is this all that we love God? Is our attendance here tonight, or at any other service time, a true reflection of how we feel about God and His significance to our lives? One hour a week - maybe two? Are our offerings genuine reflections of God's importance in our lives? Does the amount of work we put into our faith life really indicate how deep our trust in God is? Sometimes, yes - and sometimes no.

We do not come to church to serve God, primarily. We come to be served. We come to hear the Word and be strengthened by God through Word and Sacrament. We come to have the burden of our sins lifted off of our shoulders by the precious words of absolution, which God has arranged to be spoken to us by the lips of the pastor. We come to be refreshed and renewed.

Solomon ended his prayer at the consecration of the Temple with these three words, "Hear and forgive." We come to

Mount Zion tonight with precisely the same intention. We come to ask God to be attentive to our prayers, and to forgive us our sins. The cross on the altar and over on the standard serve us as the reminders that God has heard our prayer, and always will hear our prayer, and that our sins have been forgiven.

We don't have the Temple any longer, but we have something better. We have Immanuel, God with us. He walked among us, and kept the Law for us, and paid for our sins, and died in our place, so that we might have forgiveness of sins, and resurrection from our graves, and eternal life in glory with Him. It is ours by grace through faith. "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved!"

Jesus did not just accomplish His great work on the cross on Golgotha 2,000 years ago, and then leave us alone, either. He promised to be with us until the end of the world. "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst." We are modern Zion. We do not need to go to a distant mountain to see anything. We are the Mountain. We are the people of God and the body of Christ - and the sign of the presence of Christ among us is our gathering together and sharing in Word and Sacrament. Right now, this that we are doing tonight is our reminder. The person next to you, or in front of you, or behind you in the pew is God's reminder.

They are also the answer to the question, What difference does it make? Keeping faith with each other serves to steady us and encourage us and remind us of God and of His love and of what is really important. Breaking faith with one another is a denial of God, and denial of His love and attention toward us, a twisting of our focus from God to ourselves. When my pleasure, my interest, my comfort

becomes more important than God's will, - or my behavior becomes a denial of God's ability or desire to see me and be intimately involved in my life, I teach my neighbor, my brother or sister in Christ, a false lesson. I withdraw their support and encouragement for true faith and faithful living, and I unthinkingly and unlovingly encourage their despair and unbelief, instead of building them up in hope, in confidence, and in love.

Mount Zion, not us, but the hill in Jerusalem, and the Temple that sat upon it, remind us of God's love for us, His desire to be a significant actor in our lives, and His willingness to hear our prayer. That Temple reminds us of ourselves and how important each of us is at every moment. We each now are the temple. "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?" The text from 1 Corinthians 6 continues, "For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body."

As we take leave of this Mountain of Faith, I suggest you look at one another. There in your brother or sister in Christ, is Mount Zion today. What you see when you look at one another, fellow believers, is God's reminder to you of His love, and His interest in you, and His attention to you, and His desire to hear and answer your prayers. That is the meaning of Mount Zion for us today. That is the meaning of our 165th Anniversary today.