

May 2, 2010  
Rev. 21:1-6, 22-23  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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## House and Home

A number of years ago a mother in the church I was serving told a group of us how she had been driving by the church with her young child, when he cried out, “Mommy there’s God!” “Really?” she replied, “Where?” By then they had passed the church, but the boy, still excited, responded, “Right back there. He was mowing the lawn.” Puzzled, the mother asked, “Why do you think that’s God?” “Because it’s God’s house, so that must be God mowing the lawn,” he concluded.

Throughout human history people have been on the lookout for God. We ponder the question, “Where is God?” The biblical story begins with an encounter with God in a garden and it ends with a vision of God in the city. In between, the Bible tells of encounters with God on the mountaintop and in the valley of the shadow of death. Sometimes God is spoken of as residing in the heavens with designated places of encounter on earth. Other times, God surprises people showing up where they least expect it.

The early nomadic Israelites, who themselves lived in tents, had a tent for God. God’s tabernacle, God’s tent, (the Latin word tabernacle means tent) traveled with them. They set it up in each new place. However, when they became a people of the Land, they eventually built a Temple in Jerusalem as the House of God. This development was not without controversy, however. “Couldn’t the money be better used to care for the widows and orphans?” some asked. “Who are we to think we can put God in a designated space?” others queried. Still others challenged, “But the heavens tell of the glory of God. Why would we go inside?” Throughout the biblical story there is tension about the Temple – the original building of it, who has control of the temple, the spiritual traumas each time it was destroyed, and the questions about rebuilding it when the people returned from exile. Yet, the Jerusalem Temple had become central for many people’s spiritual and religious experience.

You can see the creative tension between a focus on people and a focus on buildings in these ponderings. At the last council meeting we talked about this polarity of people and buildings. Each is important for the life of a group, whether that be a family, a school, a church, a retirement community, etc. There are benefits from paying attention to people and for paying attention to buildings. There are also dangers when we over focus on one or the other. For example, the Harriet Beecher Stowe school. At this point people are excited about the new building, but it will not be a school without the teachers and students.

If you’ve received your church newsletter, you already know that the Long Range Planning committee is resuming our congregation’s work with Scott Simons Architects to help us continue

studying our facilities. I want to thank the LRP committee for their ongoing work these last couple of years following up with the state and the town on the changing traffic proposals and now resuming the work with the architects. They have been hard at work. In the next few months in this next phase of our work, the focus will be on these buildings on this side of the street –this very special house of God and the attached Vestry and Morrell Room. In the coming months, we will be asking for your input as we seek to be good stewards of both this extraordinary historical structure and of our ongoing mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We hope you will be sure to participate in the conversations that will be happening. Decisions about any changes will be made by the congregation, because we trust that God is among the people.

Trusting that God is among the people is exactly John's final vision in Revelation. In this vision of *a new heaven and a new earth*, John says that *the holy city, the new Jerusalem, is coming down out of heaven from God*. Heaven is moving to earth. *God's home is among the people*.

Yet there is a very surprising aspect to this new city. *I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb*. In other words, God will be with us wherever we go. No matter what happens, even if there is no temple, God still is and will always be.

Why would John express this vision of hope? Because of what was happening in the world around him in the present. The book of Revelation was written during the last third of the first century A.D., which was indeed a time of great conflict and struggle for the Jewish community and the developing Christian communities. They were both being persecuted. One of the pivotal events occurred in 70 A.D. in Jerusalem, and it had to do with the House of God.

During Jesus' time the desire of Jewish authorities to preserve the Jewish temple in Jerusalem had necessitated some kind of cooperation with the occupying Roman authorities. Then, in 66 A.D. Jewish defenders recaptured Jerusalem driving out the Romans. However, in 70 A.D. the Roman army conquered Jerusalem again and this time they destroyed the Temple. The House of God was gone, changing the face of Judaism forever. The Jews left the practice of priesthood, as it had been centered in the Temple, behind and developed rabbinic Judaism, which would travel with them wherever they were. God was mobile again.

The destruction of the Temple changed the reality of the early Christian community as well. It's important to remember that in those first decades after Jesus' death and resurrection many Jewish Christians – Jews who were followers of Jesus - were still attending synagogue and going to temple for high holy days, along with gathering in homes with others who were following in the Way of Jesus. The destruction of the Temple facilitated the separation of the Christians from the Jewish community and focused their gatherings in meeting spaces.

In the face of such a huge shift as the destruction of the temple and the ongoing persecution, people wondered - What was the world coming to? Was there any hope? This is exactly the reality confronting John the visionary.

John's answer is Yes. There is profound hope. For, as John says, *God's home is among the people. God will dwell with them and God indeed will be with them*.

God's house, the sanctuary, provides valuable space for worship, but God's home is among the people. God dwells with us when we are gathered for worship. Then when the worship is ended and our service continues as we go out into the world, God goes with us. God is among the people.

There is a new United Church of Christ ad that depicts the conviction that God is at home among the people . It is a 90-second video message, circulating on the web. The ad is called "The Language of God" and is a collage of images of people. Images of people in worship and on the streets advocating for justice, people enjoying nature and serving in soup kitchens, people in homes and at work.

This message was released on YouTube on April 16. It received so many hits so quickly that YouTube thought something was fishy with the count. You can go to [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org) and on the home page click where it says the Stillspeaking Ad, "the Language of God." If you don't have a computer, feel free to come to the church office and we'd be glad to show it to you.

So know that when the worship is ended, and our service continues, God is calling us to be the language of God in the world, witnessing to the promise that God is at home among the people.