

Sermon for Sunday, August 23, 2015
 St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
 The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

“God lives in glass and is shaped by the wind”

Natasha, 7 years old, Christian, South Africa.

“God lives above the attic in the sky.”

Virraj, 6 years old, Hindi, South Africa.

“God lives on a star. He has no eyes or mouth. He is like a star, himself. There is not such a big star anywhere. I haven’t seen him yet. I have been looking for him, for the star.”

Philip, 4 years old, Orthodox Christian, Bulgaria.

“God is in the world by we don’t see him. We feel him in the stomach when he knocks.”

Shakked, 7 years old, Jewish, Israel.

“God lives in his house with his wife, Maria, and they stay there.”

Konstandia, 6 years old, Greek Orthodox, Greece.

“God lives in our hearts.”

Erik, 10 years old, Catholic, Gypsy (Romanos), Czech Republic.

“God lives in a place with clean clouds and fresh air to keep the soul clear.”

Sang Mi, 10 years old, Christian, Korea.

“God lives in the sky with the clouds.”

Georgie, 7 years old, Jewish, USA.

Those were some of the answers that children gave when they were asked to draw a picture of God that shows what they think God looks like and where God lives, and to tell a story about the picture.

Five hundred children from thirty countries and twenty religious traditions were interviewed, and some of their responses were published in a book called “God lives in glass.”

It all began when a Dad was looking at his kids’ drawings, drawings that were all about who God is, and realized that although as an adult he had different ideas than they did, he still had the same questions that he’d had when he was a little boy.
 What is God?
 Where is God?

How can I be certain that God is present?

They're age old questions, aren't they?

As far back as we can trace

human storytelling,

they told stories to answer these questions.

The Akkadian epic of Gilgamesh,

the Australian Aboriginal dreaming of the Rainbow Serpent,

and the creation story in our own Scriptures

are all attempts

to answer those same questions.

And all reflect a yearning for God

and a longing to be at a place where Jesus is present.

And that's is the focus of our Psalm today.

“How dear to me is your dwelling, O LORD of hosts!” it begins.

My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the
LORD;

my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.”

The sparrow has found her a house

and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young; *

by the side of your altars, O LORD of hosts,

my King and my God.

Happy are they who dwell in your house! *

they will always be praising you.

This psalm comes from a time

when the focus of worship for the people of God

is Jerusalem,

and within Jerusalem, the temple.

We've heard the story of how that temple came to be

over the last few weeks of our Old Testament readings.

Way back, when the Abraham first answered God's call

and travelled to the promised land,

when Isaac and Jacob settled their families there,

in a world where everyone had their own household deities,
God tended to be thought of
as just another family's own personal God.

What is God? The one who called us.
Where is God? In the promised land.
How can I be certain that God is present? Because God promised.

And when they went to Egypt to escape the famine,
they took their God with them,
and as they grew
and became a whole nation and culture in exile,
God became for them a national God.

And then they escaped, and it wasn't so much that they took God with them,
as that God took them, out into the wilderness,
leading them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

But it was on Mount Sinai
that it became the most explicit:
there God gave Moses the Ten Commandments,
and with them,
the instructions for a special wooden box that would carry them,
and not only them,
because where the ark was,
there God was guaranteed to be.

And so God travelled
with the people,
on through the wilderness
and into the promised land,
always present
wherever the ark was.

What is God? The one who rescued us.
Where is God? In the cloud and in the fire and in the ark.
How can I be certain that God is present? Because we can see the cloud and fire and ark.

In the generations that followed
the ark continued to mark the holy place, the presence of God.

But it had no permanent home.

It wasn't until King David built his permanent capital city
on the slopes of Mount Zion,
and his son Solomon
built a temple on the adjoining hill, Mount Moriah,
that, as we heard in our Old Testament reading today,
the ark came to rest in its permanent home, the temple,
and God was known
be present there.

And that's where the worship of God
by the Jewish people
was directed,
there, where the presence of God
was tangible.

And its where the people of God would make pilgrimages,
on the great feast days, and as often as they possibly could,
going to worship the God what had created them
and continued to lead them.

That story of pilgrimage is told in our psalm:

Happy are the people whose strength is in you! *
whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.
Those who go through the desolate valley will find it a
place of springs,
for the early rains have covered it with pools of water.
They will climb from height to height, *
and the God of gods will reveal himself in Zion.

What is God? The one who rescued us.

Where is God? In the temple.

How can I be certain that God is present? Because I can see the temple.

The temple was the focus of worship,
the place where God was guaranteed to be present.
And it was counted a privilege to be able to be there.
And it still is.

And it's why Jewish people continue to pray at the Western Wall,
all that remains of their temple.

Because of course,
that first temple didn't survive.
The Holy Land was invaded;
the temple broken into ruins;
the people taken into exile.

And so began one of the most profound challenges to their faith.
“How can we sing the songs Zion in a foreign land?”
they lamented.
“How can we worship God
without the ark or the temple?”
“Where is our God?”

And the answer was
that God was with them.
God was not a God of only one place.
God was a traveling God,
as God had always been,
and God would be with his people
wherever
they were.

What is God? The one who rescued us.
Where is God? With God's people.
How can I be certain that God is present? I'm not sure.

And in time, the exile was over, and the people returned,
and the temple was rebuilt,
and God was back home.
For now.

But then came the Roman empire
and another invasion,
and while the temple was safe for now,
no one was sure
how long it would last.

What is God? The one who rescued us.
Where is God? In the temple, and in our synagogues.
How can I be certain that God is present? Because the priests tell me so.

And somewhere way up north,
far from the temple,
in a village synagogue,
a young man
was talking about God,
a young man, who at his birth had been called Emmanuel, God with us.

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty....Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

As Christians,
we have inherited Jewish tradition about God.
But Jesus took it one step further.
Jesus came
as Emmanuel, God with us,
so that we could know God
as well as we know one another,
and so that we know that God
knows what it is
to be like us.

And Jesus
came
to give himself for us,
body and blood,
bread and wine,
life and salvation.

God promises to be present
when we worship,
God promises to be present
when we receive the Eucharist,
the gift of his body and blood,
and through that
God promises to be with us

in the whole of our lives.

Isn't that incredible?

We who yearn for God can know him,
and God knows us, and God lives in us.

And so, back to our questions:

What is God? The one who gives life.

Where is God? In Jesus Christ, in bread and wine, in we who receive.

How can I be certain that God is present? Because I have shared the body of Christ.

The gifts of God

for the people of God.

Come, receive him,
and worship.