

“But will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! ¹⁹ Yet give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy, O LORD my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence. ²⁰ May your eyes be open toward this temple day and night, this place of which you said you would put your Name there. May you hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. ²¹ Hear the supplications of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place; and when you hear, forgive.”
(2 Chronicles 6:18-21)

Why Did We Build this House?

Why did we build this house? Now, when I say “we,” I'm using a little poetic license. Today we're celebrating the 50th anniversary of the dedication of this church building. Since I'm going to turn 45 later this year, I really had nothing to do with that construction project. But my great-grandfather was an elder in this church. My parents were married in this building. I was baptized here when it was still “the new church.” And I have many memories of this building – Sunday school and catechism class in the basement. Sitting in the back pew when we were little and being shocked the day my mother kept going and moved us up to the front. Weddings and funerals for so many members of my family. I preached my first sermon from this pulpit when my sister got married here. I was ordained in this building and commissioned to go to Colombia as a world missionary. I'm certain that I am not the only person here with so many memories of this church. This building has been a part of all of your lives and family histories, too. But, my friends, did we build this house for that reason? Did our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents sacrifice their money and their time so that we could have a place to celebrate family? Is this a museum that preserves our personal history? No. Certainly, my children have memories of the churches they have grown up in and those memories will always be important to them. But those memories are really the by-product of the real purpose of any Christian church building. **Why did we build this house?**

I. So God's Name could dwell here.

II. So God's people could worship here.

I.

This morning, we're studying a portion of the prayer that King Solomon spoke when he dedicated his temple in Jerusalem. That was a magnificent building. King Solomon used more than 23 tons of gold in that project. Clearly, he was working with a much larger budget than our forefathers were! That was fitting because his building was the only church for the entire nation of Israel. Yet, Solomon prayed, **“But will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!”**

King Solomon knew that God is greater than any physical reality. God is everywhere all the time. Even heaven itself is too small to hold him. God fills every cubic centimeter of the universe at every moment. If God was far too great to dwell in the magnificent temple of Solomon, do we really imagine that God lives here in this building? It's a beautiful church and it's a blessing to us. But the heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain the Lord our God. How much less this church we have built?

Yet, for us, this is the house of God. This is the place where his Name dwells for us. Solomon said, **“May your eyes be open toward this temple day and night, this place of which you said you would put your Name there.”** God had put his Name in the temple in Jerusalem. For the Old Testament people, that was an extremely significant statement. When God called Moses to bring his people up out of Egypt, Moses had asked, “What is your name?” The Name of the Lord means more than the words and titles we use for him. In the Old Testament, it referred to God's presence among his people, especially in the temple. Throughout the Scriptures, God's Name signifies everything that we know about him – all the doctrine, all the teaching, all the love. When Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, he said about his disciples, “I have revealed you to them.” If you look in your Bibles, you'll see a footnote. The Greek says, “your name.” Jesus revealed God's name to his disciples. Does that mean they didn't know God's name before that? Of course not. They were Jews. They grew up with the Old Testament. It means that Jesus taught them more about the true God. He

taught them to understand his love for them and his gospel promises. It means that Jesus taught them doctrine that they could never have known before.

God's Name dwells here because this is the place that we have come to for the past fifty years to learn about Jesus. To know the love of God. To hear the truth in a world that is confused and darkened by sin. Truly, if we did not build this church to be a dwelling place for the Name of God, to be a place where we proclaim God's Word in its truth and purity, to be a place where the light of the gospel shines, then our forefathers wasted their time and effort and we have gathered here today for nothing.

But that is why they built this building. We need to understand how easy it would be for us to lose the Name of God that has been preached here for so many years. You must understand how many voices are out there which ridicule the simple gospel message you hear every Sunday. You must understand how many people who call themselves Christians believe that churches like this are wasting their time and money and effort trying to teach pure doctrine. Without a doubt, there are those in this community who consider this congregation to be loveless because you put the word first, because you would dare to exclude another Christian from communion because they don't believe what you believe. And if we're honest, haven't we all struggled to be faithful to all that God says? In a sinful world, it's never easy to proclaim the Name, to stand on the word, to uphold those things God says which people don't like to hear.

My friends, why did we build this church? Why do we keep coming to it? Are we here simply because of family tradition? Are we here only because we have all those memories? Are we here because this has been our church, but we really don't buy all those things those pastors insist on? Are we here because of God's Name or are we here for something else? That's the question every member must answer because when members lose sight of the reasons for being in a church, the congregation will lose sight, too. This building cannot keep us faithful to the word. It cannot make us stand firm on all that God says. This building cannot strengthen and encourage us when our own hearts wrestle with the hard truths of Scripture.

Do we have to admit that our personal commitment to the truth is weak? Do we have to admit that we aren't so sure about all that we were taught in catechism class and we wish that WELS pastors would just get over it? Do we have to admit that our commitment to God and his word comes in fifth or sixth or twentieth place after kids' sports and work and family time and weekend activities? Does the Name dwell in our hearts? Do we make it dwell in this building by returning here to listen to that word over and over again? We were all born with sinful hearts. Each of us has a sinner inside who rebels against God, who hates all that God says, who wants nothing to do with the truths of Scripture. Again and again, he undermines the gospel God has given us. Because that's true, every one of us deserves nothing better than death and hell.

But my friends, God did give us that gospel. Jesus did reveal God's Name to us – he came to show us the Father, he came so that we can see the love of God that reached out to us before the world began. Before God said, "Let there be light," he chose you to have faith in him. Long before this church was ever built, he sent his Son to live the life of perfect faith and commitment to God's word that you and I can never live. Jesus' heart was free from sin, so he was always one hundred percent committed to God. He didn't live that way to show us how bad we are. He wasn't perfect to make us feel guilty by comparison. He lived that life in our place. God gives us credit for the perfect life of Christ. And during this Lenten season, on Wednesday nights, you gather here to walk with Jesus to the cross and the empty tomb. You see him stepping into your place to die for you. Jesus took everything that our sin deserves. He took our death. He took our hell. He took all God's anger at us as sinners. And he paid for it all. He died and then he rose. God has forgiven us. God has wiped away all record of our sin. Now God calls our sinful hearts "perfect." Knowing that is knowing God's Name. My friends, **why did we build this house? So God's Name can dwell here.**

II.

King Solomon was praying when he said these things. He asked God to pay attention to him and to keep his eyes always focused on the temple in Jerusalem. Solomon had a special reason for that request: this was the place where God's people came to worship and pray. Solomon said, **"Hear the supplications of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place."**

How many prayers have we offered in this house of God? How many prayers for blessings on baptized babies and confirmands and newlyweds? For healing of diseases and for comfort for those who grieve? How many prayers have we offered here for guidance in peace and war? For good government and good preaching

and spiritual growth? How often have you gathered and prayed for your children in the school and the Sunday school? How often have you breathed silent prayers in this building that no one heard but God alone?

God always did hear. He always will hear the prayers of his children. Sin separates us from God. But Jesus takes the separation away. In Christ, God gives us a direct line to him. When you gather here in faith in Jesus and you lift up your voices – or just your hearts – to God in prayer, then he hears. Unlike the Old Testament people of God, we don't have to go to one central sanctuary in Jerusalem to offer our prayers. Jesus tells us that the time has come for all true worshippers of God to worship him in spirit and in truth. Faith in Christ makes this a place where God constantly turns his eyes and ears. He hears all our prayers.

I am particularly struck by the last line of what Solomon said, **“Hear from heaven, your dwelling place; and when you hear, forgive.”** Forgive. Not every prayer that we've offered here was a prayer of repentance. But Sunday after Sunday for the last fifty years, we've confessed our sins here and God has forgiven us. My friends, what is the heart of Christian worship? Is it our prayers? Is it our offerings? Is it the churches we build and the songs we sing and the commitments we make? Those things are all a part of Christian worship, but they are not the heart of Christian worship. The heart is still Jesus. The heart is still forgiveness. Christian worship is being served by God with his forgiveness. It begins when we close our mouths and listen to him tell us how much he loves us. All those other things must follow that greatest thing of all: forgiveness.

We built this church to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. We built this church so that we could gather here and baptize our children and receive the body and blood of Christ in communion. We built this church so that the gospel could stream from this pulpit and fill our hearts with faith. And then, we could lift up our voices in prayer and praise and celebrate all that God has done by dedicating our hearts and our lives to serving him.

My friends, that work is not done. It will not be done until Christ returns. Dowagiac may be a small town. But there are still thousands of people here who need to know their Savior. There are hundreds of Christians who gather in this building on Sunday mornings to be fed with the gospel so that they can live in faith and let the light of Christ shine in their day to day lives. In your day to day lives. Hearing that gospel is our worship. May it continue for fifty more years and beyond. My friends, **why did we build this house? So God's people can worship here.**

When I was five years old, Pastor Jeske sent me a letter wishing me a happy birthday. He taped a quarter inside that letter. My mom kept both the letter and the quarter for me in a photo album along with the pictures and mementos of my life. I still have them. Every once in while, I see that letter and it reminds me of how God has used this church in my life to build my faith so that today I have the privilege of serving in the public ministry. What God did here for me is still bearing fruits. My friends, don't let this celebration today be only about the past. Let it be about the present. Let it be about the future. Let it be about the gospel we still have to proclaim, about the children who still come to our school to hear God's word, about the adults who still come to kneel at Jesus' feet and here his words of pardon and peace. May God renew this congregation's faith. May God lead you to commit yourselves to decades of proclaiming his Name here. May he make you a beacon of light shining in the darkness of sin. Amen.