

UNSETTLED

I grew up attending church with my family every Sunday and for the bulk of my childhood and youth that meant going to Orinda Community Church. Over time, this church became extended family as we worshipping, prayed, sang, ate, laughed, and grieved together, both at the church itself, and through various social activities often held in people's homes. Orinda Community Church was a big part of what made Orinda "home" for me.

Although, I rarely attended church in college –Sunday morning just did not work well with my weekend social life –when I began my first job after graduating and took off for Tampa, Florida, one of the first things I did was seek out a church. Florida is not exactly awash in UCC churches but I did manage to find a wonderful church, where I could worship, sing in the choir, and participate in adult education. Although I was on the road during the day visiting various insurance agencies I was almost always home for dinner and could participate in evening church activities.

After six months in Tampa I was transferred to Jacksonville, and my territory was more unwieldy. I alternated between a week on the road going from Jacksonville to Ocala, to Gainesville, to Tallahassee, to Orlando, and then back to Jacksonville for one week, and then the next week went from Jacksonville to Orlando to Melbourne to Fort Pierce, to Daytona, and then back to Jacksonville. I was only home on the weekends. I tried to get involved in one of just two UCC churches available in Jacksonville but found that having my only contact with the congregation be Sunday morning worship I just couldn't make any connections. Church in Jacksonville just never "clicked." When I was transferred after six months to a more permanent post in Cleveland, I was pleased to find a wonderful UCC church near my home in Bedford Heights. Even after I a ways a way to Cleveland Heights, I remained connected to South Haven UCC. It became my church home. I finally felt settled.

This morning we encounter King David "settled in his house" after "... the Lord had given him rest from his enemies, all around him." It doesn't take David long after he has settled into his fine "house of cedar" to long for his worship and his relationship with God to be equally settled. Having God dwell in a tent just won't do, so David sets out to build God a "house" as well – a house worth of the God who had brought Israel out of Egypt and David to the throne. But God is having none of it. God has been content to move around in a tent from the escape from Egypt to this very time with David. God has been on the move with God's people, fire by night and a cloud by day, comfortably unsettled.

Even in our English translation you can get the sense that there is a bit of a word play with "house" going on. The underlying Hebrew can, depending, on context, mean "house," "dwelling," "palace," "temple," or "dynasty." And all of these meanings may play a role in this passage, but the key theological focus is on the relationship between temple and dynasty.

Many scholars consider this passage the most important theological text in the books of Samuel.

In but a few verses, a major shift is articulated, not just from a God who moved around in a tent to a God who will eventually have a Temple (built by David's son, Solomon), but also a shift from a God whose relationship with God's people has been markedly conditional: "if you do this, then I will be with you" to a God who says "I will be with you regardless." Note, this is not a replacement of the covenant requirements Moses and the people received at Mt. Sinai, but as one scholar puts it, an "encompassing" of the conditional "if" of the Sinai covenant by the "nevertheless" of unconditional promise.

In a sense you could say that this passage "settled" the matter of God's divine grace towards humankind while at the same time preserving divine freedom as far as where God chooses to dwell. As human beings, there is a natural longing to having, at least some things, settled. Very few of us are capable of living comfortably as itinerants. Even if our jobs keep us on the move, we long to at least have some place to come home to, and that includes where we worship: the place where God meets us.

I think this is the ongoing challenge for the church: How to worship God in our settled locations while remembering that God is always on the move. As one author puts it, "God meets us in buildings but is not constrained in them or by them." And that is indeed good news. Buildings, even grand structures such as this glorious Meeting House, come and go. We, come and go from them. And as COVID has taught us, sometimes we just can't access the building, but God does not remain trapped there. As one person notes, "...God likes camping among us, wherever we are." That includes right now, whether here in this Meeting House, or in your home – God is with you. When you're on the road and unsettled – God is with you. When you are in between homes or starting out in a new community – God is with you. When your life is upended by a physical relocation, psychological displacement, or emotional upheaval – God is with you. Whether you are able to travel to a church or confined to your home - God is with you. When grief and mourning overwhelm and disorient you, God is with you. When you have gotten off the path or started off in a new and unfamiliar direction, God is with you. However, wherever you may be settled or unsettled – God is with you. The point is that we don't carry God to a place and install God there. God carries us, moves with us, unconditionally forgives and graces us. In these unsettling and unsettled times – God comes to us, meets us where we are, and dwells with us, moving even as God moves us.

All of which all says something about our mission and ministry as a church. Institutions, churches included, have a way of getting a bit too settled at times. We learn the routines, we go through the motions, we hold the organizational meetings, we check off our to-do lists, we follow the prescribed order of worship, we sing the songs we sung since our childhood we support the organizations and missions we have for years. None of this wrong or bad on its own, but if we become so settled in our ways that we think we've got God all figured out and pinned down, we're in trouble.

It's understandable, like David, we long for peace and rest. Moving about all the time and forever changing plans can be exhausting. But let us not so long for peace, for knowing what comes next, for well-executed plans, that we are no longer open to God's surprising actions, and are frozen in one place.

God continues to be on the move. Always with us, yet always calling us onward. With ears a tingle may we listen for God's word, with eyes attuned may be notice where God is already at work, with our feet ready to forge new paths, may find a home with a God on the move, settled in God's unsettled nature.

AMEN