

*Not a Place, but a Person*

*44 "Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. 45 Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, 46 who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built a house for him. 48 Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, 49 "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? 50 Did not my hand make all these things? 51 "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, 53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it." (Act 7:44-53 English Standard Version)*

The farm on which I spent part of my childhood both grew crops and raised animals for meat and milk. Among those animals were two particularly powerful creatures. The first were the bulls we kept for breeding and for sale, in our case purebred angus bulls. The second were the few horses we had. We used them once a year for a short cattle drive from summer pastures back to the farmstead, but for the rest of the year they were for recreational riding. When in junior high I owned our only horse from Thoroughbred lineage. As a twelve year old, sitting atop him put me head and shoulders above any other riders. He was a magnificent large, but gentle horse.

Both bull and horse are too large and powerful for a human to control without some assistance. Often that assistance is a ring in the nose of the bull, and a bit in the mouth of the horse. Both these small pieces of steel, the ring and bit, gives one an ability to control the animals, almost. The other element required is trust, for both cattle and horses can emotionally read a person, and learn over time if this person is trustworthy.

The Acts passage above is part of the speech given by Stephen, who according to tradition was the first martyr of the Christian era. Reading it, you might notice a tone of blame and shame at work, perhaps not the best oratory style for one facing a hostile crowd. In the midst of his remarks is a recounting of tabernacle ("tent" in the reading) and temple. Both structures were understood by the descendants of Abraham as places where the Lord might dwell. When a Jewish devotee or Christian follower of Jesus speak of "going into the house of the Lord" they mean entering a place set apart and dedicated to worship and devotion. A nice thought, but only a short way from functioning as "nose ring and bit", or as a subtle way to exercise control over God, or more likely control over God's people.

*"Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands" (v. 48).* God does not dwell in houses, on occasion the Lord visits them, but they are not pens or pastures with which we can control God's movements. Our Lord shows up where God wills, and when needed. That may be in the House of the Lord, through preaching or the offering of bread and wine, water and word. God may appear anywhere in the world in the service offered by a contemporary deacon or by the "cup of kindness" you give to one in need. We do not control God, our need is to trust God.

There is no place you might go to always find God. However, there is no place where you can go where God cannot find you.

*Holy One, remind me that I cannot build you a house and that is good news. For you are the One who builds a relationship with me, one undeserving of your love and grace, but grateful beyond words for your generosity. Make me, not a gatekeeper, but an instrument of your peace. Amen*