

The presence of God...that's really what David is celebrating here and what we're going to talk about this morning.

The first part of our reading tells about David's anointing as king.

The second part moves ahead in the story quite a few years after the first. It might seem a bit strange to us.

An ark? Wasn't that a big boat? And why does it warrant a parade and dancing and singing?

Well, yes...the boat was one kind of ark.

But this is a different ark. This ark is more like a big cabinet. And in it were the scrolls of Torah...God's law. And for the Jewish people Torah represented the very presence of God. This scene in the second part of our reading shows the return of God's presence to the people of Israel.

The ark had been captured by Israel's enemies. It got moved around from city to city in enemy land, but caused all sorts of troubles in those places because it was not where it belonged.

David and the people of Israel are dancing and singing because the ark is back home...the presence of God is back.

This event also marks the end of years of civil war in Israel and war with the Philistines. The Philistines are defeated, Israel's first king, Saul is defeated, David reigns over a united nation, and the presence and blessing of God are back in Jerusalem. All is right with the world.

That seems worthy of a parade.

OK, so the presence of God especially seems worthy of celebration. So, where's our ark?

Well, here's the thing. While we still appreciate God's law, and while much of God's law still can guide us, for us the presence of God is not found there.

Because Jesus came to us as God in person...God actually became present to the world as a flesh and blood human being.

But Jesus, the flesh and blood human being, is not with us as flesh and blood now. He rose from the dead and ascended to heaven...which really is impossible to grasp. But it makes him able to be present to us in a different way now.

So where is the presence of God now?

Here...in the church... in the bread and wine of communion. In the proclaimed word of gospel.

And...in us... those of us gathered as the church.

And the presence of God doesn't just hang out in here. The presence of God goes with us when we leave here. And when we leave here, we find the presence of God is already out there, too.

I had a pretty good presence of God experience these last few days.

Tuesday night I left to meet a group of people from around the Nebraska Synod to help repair flood damaged houses in Lynch Nebraska. I got back yesterday afternoon.

Sometimes the presence of God looks like guys with tool belts and fancy saws and lots of knowledge and experience in construction. Sometimes the presence of God looks like people who haven't a clue about construction but are willing to learn and want to help. I'll let you guess which category I'm in.

We spent 3 and a half days in Lynch. The group was divided into four teams. Three teams worked in Lynch and one went to Niobrara. I was in Lynch working at the home of an older couple whose little house had been buried by 3 feet of water and mud.

Lynch is a tiny town that slopes down toward Ponca Creek, a tributary of the Missouri that runs north of the Niobrara River. A big chunk of the town closest to the creek was inundated with flood waters on March 13.

Houses that had never flooded before were buried in water and mud. Most people did not have flood insurance. It's expensive and either their homes were where they didn't have to, or they didn't have a mortgage that made it imperative.

This mission group from the Synod had been to Lynch in June to begin the repair and rebuilding process, so this was their second time there.

I mudded and sanded drywall in a bathroom and put doorknobs on the new doors our team hung. I made a trip to Menard's in Norfolk to get materials that weren't available closer. I did assorted other jobs that could be quickly taught.

There were 26 of us. The group was led by Pastor Becky Beckmann who serves three churches in and around Newman Grove. She and the core members of our group are the Synod's primary mission trip group. They've been bringing the presence of God to areas hit by floods, hurricanes and tornadoes for ten years.

But there's more to this than just the work. We also listened to people's stories. We learned about their lives and how those lives were changed on March 13.

And when you listen to people's stories, you learn that the presence of God was already in Lynch and Niobrara and all the other places so badly affected before volunteers ever got there...before the National Guard and FEMA got there.

One of the homes part of our group worked on was the home of the Lynch fire chief and his family. When the floods hit, even though their own house was under water, they worked for three days solid, without sleep, to help get people to a safe dry place. That's the presence of God.

The presence of God was also with the people who were helpless in the face of the floods. There simply is nothing we can ever face where God is not already present.

You can see the presence of God in the resilience of people who lost everything. You can hear it in the stories they tell, whether they ever mention God or not.

We began and ended every day with a devotion led by different small groups. One evening Pastor Becky had us each talk about a way we had been blessed that day, and how we had passed that blessing on.

The fire chief and his family were with us that evening.

There were some powerful things shared in our circle. The family felt blessed by knowing that people hadn't forgotten about their plight and still wanted to help.

But the volunteers all expressed how blessed they felt by being there. We were blessed by the stories we heard and the people we met. We were blessed by people who let us into their lives at their most vulnerable time.

As we shared around the circle that evening, the presence of God could be powerfully felt. One man shared that he felt that our experience had to be pretty close to what the kingdom of God looked like.

After we finished devotions that night, the mom in this family shared with one of the volunteers how surprised the family was that the volunteers felt blessed. In their mind, the blessing went one way...and they were the recipients.

But any of you who have ever done volunteer or mission work know that's not how it works. The blessing goes both ways. When you do mission work, you will likely receive at least as much as you give. And you will know you have been in the presence of God.

God's promise to David and the people of Israel was that God would meet them in those treasured words in the Ark of the Covenant.

Jesus' promise to us is that he will come to us in the bread and wine of communion and in the proclaimed word of the gospel.

But, as Jesus tells us in Matthew's gospel, he will also meet us in the faces of the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the poor, the prisoners...and the people who have lost everything in a flood.

Of course we have all been in the presence of God this week because we're never not. But those of us who went to Lynch experienced one of those thin places...places where the distance between us and the kingdom of God seems very thin.

A place where the presence of God is worthy of celebration.