**Shekinah: God’s Presence with Us**

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**Part 1**

In my three years of serving as pastor at Nutana Park Mennonite Church, I’ve gotten the sense that connections between our congregation and this place run deep. There is great affection for Shekinah Retreat Centre – for the great memories of being campers and staff here, for a long tradition of church retreats here, for the many funds and volunteer hours spent helping to build the beautiful lodge and cabins here. This past month alone, there were celebrations at and of Shekinah, from the 40th Anniversary to the Bike-Paddle-Hike-a-Thon, to our Camp Sunday sharing last week and our retreat here today. When speaking of the Shekinah 40th, Renata Klassen mentioned to me that Shekinah was talked about as a “thin place” – meaning one of those places where it seems like it is easier to feel the presence of God, where God is closer to us than elsewhere. And this is what we hope for when we encourage the next generation of children to get involved in this place. We hope for them to likewise meet a loving God here in the midst of God’s beautiful creation.

 Since this place is so important to so many of us, I wanted to take today to explore Shekinah as a name for God. That’s right, I thought we’d take Shekinah Sunday literally! As you may remember, last Spring we looked at the many biblical names for God in our worship – as the children’s story mentioned, names like: Source of Life, Shepherd, Maker of Peace, Rock, Healer, Redeemer, Father, Mother, Friend. All of these and more can be found in our Bible, meaning that these are all important names for God: as the book says, “that all the names for God were good, and no name was better than another.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

To this list, we can add the name, Shekinah. Shekinah does not appear directly in our Bible as a name for God, but rather comes from the Jewish tradition, from the writings of the rabbis (Talmud and Mishnah) and mystics (Kabbalah). It comes from the Hebrew verb, “to dwell,” and is a reference to God’s dwelling among the people.[[2]](#footnote-2) What’s interesting about the Shekinah is that this is a female name for God, so that God’s presence among God’s people is depicted as a feminine, even maternal presence, which is found everywhere from the Temple in Jerusalem to family households. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson explains, “Rather than saying directly that God or God’s Spirit descended to the Holy of Holies [in the Temple in Jerusalem], for example, the rabbis say that the *shekinah* descended, with the same meaning intended. Rather than saying that God is present among those who are attentive to the divine word, they say, ‘If two sit together and the words of the Law [are spoken] between them, the Shekinah rests between them.’”[[3]](#footnote-3)

There is an intimacy to this divine presence, as Jewish Sabbath prayers often invite Shekinah to the table as the family prepares for the Sabbath meal on Fridays at sundown. This divine presence, the Shekinah, is especially important for the people during times of upheaval or uncertainty, like the wandering in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt, or the time of captivity and exile in Babylon. As you can tell from these examples, though the name Shekinah does not appear in the Bible, the idea of her is present throughout the story of God’s people, in the Old and New Testaments, as they speak of God’s presence. So let’s listen to some examples of the divine Shekinah, God’s indwelling presence among the people, from the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament. As these are read, I invite us to think about this question: “Where is your Shekinah? In other words, where do you feel God's divine presence?”[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Genesis 1:1-2*

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

*Exodus 13:20-22*

[After crossing the Red Sea], They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night.Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

*Exodus 33:9-11, 15-16*

When Moses entered the tent [of meeting], the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tent. Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then he would return to the camp. . . . [And God said to Moses,] “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” And [Moses] said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

*Psalm 139:7-10, 13-14*

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

[[Silence]]

**Part 2**

The opening verses of our Scriptures begin in the moments before God began creating, with God’s presence hovering over the formlessness and darkness. In other words, creation begins with God drawing near, with the Shekinah becoming present in the just-forming world. This is the cosmic, creative Shekinah who gives birth to us and all living things.

 Later, when the Israelites are an established people, the Shekinah is also one who accompanies and walks with the people of God, especially during difficult journeys like the exodus from slavery in Egypt. Though the people were leaving a situation of great suffering and oppression, there was a certain familiarity to life as slaves in Egypt. Moses was leading them out into the hostile wilderness, and there were no guarantees that they would survive and make it to the promised land. But God-Shekinah goes with them, leading the way, taking the shape of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night and “Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people” (Exodus 13:22). God’s Shekinah is constantly with the people in their wandering, a mysterious yet comforting presence in fire and cloud.

 God’s conversation with Moses about this is especially tender. We’re told that God “used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.” God promises Moses, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” And Moses clings to this reassurance, saying that otherwise, the journey would not be worth it! “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here,” he says to God. God’s presence with them even becomes an identity marker for Moses, as he says, “For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth” (Exodus 33:11, 15-16). In this way they become the people among whom God dwells; that is who they are. Once they settle in the land, they come to see God dwelling in Jerusalem, on Mount Zion – or even more specifically, in the Holy of Holies within the Temple, which was the most sacred area behind a curtain, accessible only to the priests.

 But this way of conceiving of God’s presence only lasts so long, as the Temple is destroyed and the people are taken into exile in Babylon in about 586 BCE. Perhaps that is when the tradition of the Psalms became even more important, with its sense of God-Shekinah as intimately present with individuals – and thus not bound to a certain place or building. Psalm 139 is a wonderful instance of recognizing that God’s presence permeates creation, and is inescapable; God-Shekinah is with us from the womb already! So the psalmist wonders, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” God is truly everywhere, even in a strange land.

 Johnson writes that this “accompaniment” becomes the Shekinah’s most important aspect during tumultuous times: “‘Wherever the righteous go, the Shekinah goes with them.’ No place is too hostile. She accompanies the people through the post-slavery wilderness, and hundreds of years later, into exile again, through all the byways of rough times. . . . In other words, God’s indwelling Spirit was with them and her accompaniment gave rise to hope and encouragement in the darkness, a sense of divine fidelity to the promise of shalom [or peace].”[[5]](#footnote-5)

 But what about the New Testament? How is God’s presence depicted there? Let’s listen to a few examples as think about, "How do we take the opportunity to feel Shekinah in times of crisis or trouble?"[[6]](#footnote-6)

*John 1:14*

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

*Matt. 18:20*

[Jesus said,] “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

*John 14:15-20, 23*

[Jesus said to them,] “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. . . .Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

*Rev. 21:1-4*

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

[[Silence]]

**Part 3**

Here we see that in the New Testament, interrelated figures like God’s Shekinah, or God’s Word or Wisdom become flesh and dwell among us in Jesus Christ. For us as Christians, Jesus Christ is the embodied presence of God with us – the embodied Shekinah, as seen in the name Immanuel, which means, “God-with-us.” But Jesus’ life and ministry are not centred on an exclusive notion that he is God – rather, he lives in such a way that he shares God’s presence with others. This is reflected in his saying in Matthew 18:20 that “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” – a saying which echoes the rabbinic saying that ‘If two sit together and the words of the Law [are spoken] between them, the Shekinah rests between them.’ We often interpret these words of Jesus’ to mean that worship is a moment not just of thinking about the divine, but of encountering God – in this case, in the form of Christ-Shekinah, Christ the indwelling presence of God.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Perhaps the most straightforward NT connection for Shekinah, though, is the Holy Spirit, who is likewise the ongoing, somewhat elusive and mysterious presence of God with us. Jesus promises this Spirit to the disciples in John 14, and there was an early Christian tradition of viewing the Spirit as female. Given the common image of the Spirit as a dove, the Spirit was often seen as a mother bird, who shelters us under her wings, which ties her even closer to the Shekinah, who is also envisioned as female.[[8]](#footnote-8) So Jesus could just as easily have said “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees [her] nor knows [her]. You know [her], because [s]he abides with you, and [s]he will be in you” (14:15-17). Using poetic language, Jesus describes the mutual indwelling of the disciples and of the divine – they will dwell in one another, and in this way, the Divine will make her home on earth.

And in Revelation, there is a beautiful, hopeful image of a future in which God’s loving presence will be permanently accessible, where the Shekinah will overcome all grief and death: “See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Rev. 21:3-4).

 This past week, I watched teen climate activist Greta Thunberg give a powerful speech to the UN – maybe some of you saw her, too.[[9]](#footnote-9) It struck me how committed she is to standing up for God’s good Creation – even if she wouldn’t put it in those words. I have heard some call her a prophet for our time, speaking truth to the powerful and calling for justice for exploited people and ecosystems alike. The purpose statement of Shekinah Retreat Centre recognizes that “Shekinah is to be a setting where all who come have the opportunity to experience the presence and glory of God.” But as Greta and the Bible remind us, God’s Shekinah is not limited to this place alone. God’s Presence dwells in all of creation, which is why it’s so important that we take up Greta’s challenge to care for the earth for the sake of future generations. May this place where so many of us have encountered the Presence of God continue to remind us of that responsibility, and empower us to work for the shalom-peace of all creation. May we take courage from knowing that God’s Shekinah goes with us always. AMEN

1. Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *In God’s Name* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Johnson, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thanks to Brent Guenther for these reflection questions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Johnson, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brent Guenther. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Johnson 162-163. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Johnson, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See her speech here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAJsdgTPJpU> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)