

“The Essential Grace of Sacred Space”

1 Kings 8: 1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 37-43, 52, 54-62 (NRSV)

What is “sacred space” to you?

There is no one thing that makes a space sacred. For some of us it is the beauty of a physical structure, the artistry or architecture or aesthetic, or perhaps even the natural beauty of creation. For some of us it is about the feeling we have when we are in place; it’s a space where we can think clearly or be inspired. For some of us, a space is sacred not because of the place itself but because of who is there OR because of who is *not* there. For some of us a space is sacred because it holds treasured memories of the past or because it invites us to dream about our future.

And for most of us, sacred space is anywhere that we meet God – or experience the divine – or experience something greater than ourselves that both grounds us and frees us at the same time.

As one of my favorite spiritual writers, Robert Benson, writes

“We are not here to show something to God. We are here because God – the One who wants to be completely known – has something to show to us.”¹
You see, sacred spaces reveal something to us about God, I think. And, ourselves. Otherwise I’m not sure we would keep coming back to them.

I don't know if this is more of a statement about God or about us as people, but there are places which seem to be special, where God seems more obviously and powerfully to dwell. The book of Genesis tells how people found these places in the landscape, mountains and springs and river fords, in the “Cathedral of God’s Creation,” if you will. We certainly understand that living in Colorado. But as time goes on and God’s people journey out of slavery and wander in the wilderness, the people of God established a moveable sacred space – the Tabernacle, which held the ark

¹ Robert Benson, *Between the Dreaming and the Coming True: The Road Home to God* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1996), pg 68.

of the covenant (the laws of God) and literally the presence of the Lord.²

And in today's text, we see a whole new kind of sacred space revealed. In addition to his wisdom, King Solomon is best known for building the Temple, the official dwelling place of God for the nation of Israel, the first permanent place of worship for God's people. We only heard parts of the story in today's lesson, but the previous three chapters detail Solomon's building project, down to the architectural and decorative elements.

It took seven years to finish the construction of the Temple. Which is remarkably fast, when you think about it. Solomon used the finest of materials: the cedars of Lebanon, cypress wood, gold, silver, bronze, and huge blocks of cut and dressed stone. He has master craftsmen carve into the walls of the Temple elaborate decorations of cherubim, palm trees, and flowers. He overlaid everything – even the floor – with gold.³ From the sounds of it, it was a

magnificent building, inside and out.

And when the physical structure was complete, Solomon has the priests bring in the Ark of the Covenant. As soon as the priests put the Ark in its place, a cloud fills the Temple and the glory of the Lord is everywhere.

This cloud that fills the Temple is a sign of the presence of the Lord. It is the same cloud that led the Israelites out of Egypt and protected them from the Egyptian army (Ex. 14:19-25). It is the same cloud that descended on the top of Mount Sinai when God made a covenant with the Israelites and gave them the Law (Ex. 24:15-18). It is the same cloud that settled on the Tabernacle, the movable sanctuary, by which the Lord was present with the Israelite people throughout their wilderness wanderings (Ex. 40:34-38).⁴

You see, there is continuity here. The same God who brought Israel out of Egypt now dwells with them in their own land. And even with the

² Paul Bellan-Boyer, "Temple Talk," *City Called Heaven* (Sept. 3, 2012), accessed on August 26, 2018 at <http://citycalledheaven.org/2012/09/temple-talk.html>.

³ Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "Commentary on 1 Kings 8:[1, 6, 10-11] 22-30, 41-43," *Working Preacher* (Aug.

23, 2009), accessed on Aug. 26, 2018 at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=364.

⁴ Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

continuity of God's presence, this moment is a significant shift in worldview for them. The Israelites are no longer wandering nomads in somebody else's land. They are established now in their *own* land, the land that God promised to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel. They have their own king and their own place of worship. 8:23-26). And perhaps most significantly, from now on the Lord will still be associated with Mount Sinai, but even more with Mount Zion, the physical Temple Mount.⁵

Here's a biblical trivia tip: whenever you hear the word "Zion" in scripture, or "Jerusalem," or "Temple" – they all kind of mean the same thing. There are differences, but for our purposes, they all connote the sacred space of all sacred spaces for Israel.

It is difficult to overstate the significance of the Temple (and therefore Jerusalem/Zion) in Israelite/Jewish theology. To cite just one of a myriad of examples, Psalm 137 gives voice to the longing of the

exiles in Babylon for Jerusalem: "*By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion... If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy,*" (Ps. 137:1, 5-6).

In fact, the code of Jewish law, the Talmud, instructs Jews to recite this last verse to a bridegroom at his wedding, as he waits for his bride to arrive, so that he will remember that there is no greater joy than the joy that one should feel over Jerusalem.⁶

In Solomon's prayer, Jerusalem is "*the city that you [God] have chosen*" (1 Kgs 8:44). The Temple in Jerusalem is the place of which God says, "*My name shall be there*" (1 Kgs 8:29)... the place where heaven meets earth and where God's glory appears (Isa. 6:1-3).⁷

The Temple Solomon built, lives in the Israelite and Jewish imagination long after it is destroyed by the Babylonians; and long after its replacement,

⁵ Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

⁶ James Limburg, *Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), p. 467.

⁷ Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

the Second Temple, is destroyed by the Romans. The longing for the Temple, and for the city in which it stood, is the reason that the Passover meal traditionally ends with the words, "*Next year in Jerusalem.*" It is the reason that the Western Wall (the remaining wall of the Temple Mount that is closest to the site of the Temple) is Judaism's holiest site.⁸

And ultimately, the reason the Temple is so very important is because it is the place where God's people believed God's presence could be felt most powerfully.

But it's important to note that Solomon's dedicatory prayer does not *confine* God's presence to the Temple. In 1 Kings 8:27, Solomon acknowledges that this "house" cannot contain God; and in several verses he speaks of God's "dwelling place" being in "heaven," from where God can hear prayers and act in mercy towards those who pray (1 Kgs 8:30-49).⁹

This is a crucial theological point – that is just as important to us today as it was back then.

Although the Temple is central to Israel's worship for many centuries, it is not essential. When it is destroyed (twice!), God is still present with and attentive to God's people.¹⁰ We do not have to be in any one certain place to experience God. God is with us everywhere in all places. This is why Jesus is named Emmanuel – *God with us*. Not "God in our Sanctuary" or "God at Calvary." *God with us*. Wherever you are – God is. Wherever anyone is – God is. You don't have to be an Israelite, or an American Baptist, to know and experience God's presence.

And this is also a key theological point in today's text. In verses 41-43, Solomon speaks of the "*foreigner*" who will pray "*towards this house.*" He asks God to heed the prayer of (even) that foreigner "*so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel*" (8:43). Solomon is praying to God, but he also wants his people to hear this message that are welcome in the Temple.

We Gentiles, and *all foreigners*, are included in God's mercy

⁸ Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

⁹ Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

and have access to God. This is usually the kind of radical inclusion that we associate with Jesus, but here we have evidence of such inclusion during what could have been one of the most exclusionary celebrations of Israel's history – the dedication of their Temple after years of foreign rule and enslavement.¹¹

And even more, the inclusion is not just about welcoming all who come to meet God and worship in this place, the inclusion is also seen in Solomon's petitions and pleas to God – that God would hear *all* of the prayers of *all* of God's people. His prayer is specific in mentioning all the hardships people are facing.

And particularly, the notion of God's forgiveness and presence and mercy emerges as an important theme his prayer. It is evident throughout out his prayer, that Solomon is praying to God that this Temple becomes a place where the prayers of the people are heard and answered. And the prayers of the people are vast: he mentions the terrible drought that causes tremendous suffering for humans and

animals alike (v35). He mentions famines and all kinds of pestilences (blight, mildew, locusts, caterpillars) that threaten the crops (and therefore the food supply) in addition to other devastating events such as an enemy attack or an outbreak of plague or disease (v37 and following).

This dedicatory prayer of the Temple Solomon is not all about celebration, there is a context of pain and suffering that is very much present. And so Solomon prays that this sacred space, this Temple of *Yahweh*, would be a place not only where the people of God can come to pray without censoring themselves, but where their prayers are heard.

Solomon insistently urges God to hear the prayers of the people. And this is one of the most beautiful examples of Solomon's wisdom, I think. He knows what the people of God need. He knows that they need this sacred space to be an essential place where they receive and experience God's grace. It's not just about observing beauty, it's about experiencing connection and reconnection when that

¹¹ Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

relationship with God and others has been lost or strained or called into question by tragic events.

Even though the physical building cannot contain God's presence, Solomon knows that people will come here to meet God and to pray. Solomon knows something that we all know, I think. That when we are hurting or suffering or carrying heavy burdens, that we need to meet God in a safe and sacred space. It doesn't have to be a fancy temple or a sanctuary, but it very well may be, and because of that, Solomon wants the people who are listening to his prayer to know that they can come and pray to God in this place. No exceptions. It is sacred because God is there and is worthy of worship and praise, but also because *they*, the people, are there praying. And because in this space, they can experience forgiveness and grace and be reminded that they are not alone.

You see, sanctuaries like this one (at Calvary) are sacred because they are beautiful, yes. The light streaming through the stained glass windows reminds us of the light of Christ streaming through our lives.

The Bible on the altar reminds us of the importance of scripture to orient and reorient our lives each week. The glorious full sound of the pipe organ becomes for us, in sound, that cloud of God filling this space, filling our hearts, lifting us beyond ourselves in a way that no other instrument can. The sacredness of space and the things in this space is real. If you ever doubt that, come in here either early in the morning or late in the afternoon when the sunlight is making the colors from the stained glass windows dance across the walls and the pews and even your own skin, if you sit in the right place. It is glorious.

But I doubt you come here each week just because it's pretty. If that was the main reason you came, you'd be here at all different times throughout the week. But most of you are here at this time in this place on Sunday mornings (or at *The Gathering* on Saturday nights) because collectively it is our presence that makes this place sacred. We make it sacred. You and me. Our presence. Our prayers. It has a sacred quality that only comes over time, as memories are created, as babies are dedicated, children are baptized, youth are blessed at

graduation, families share in communion, and as lives are celebrated at memorial services.

You can meet God anywhere, but you come here. Why? Because there's an "Essential Grace to Sacred Space." Because we need places like this to be reminded of *who* we are and *whose* we are and that God's presence is close to us and will never leave us. We need to come to sanctuaries to remember that God's grace envelopes us, no matter what we've done or who we are or what our journey has been or will be.

You cannot escape God's grace. And neither can anyone else. In fact, I suppose you could say that in order for a space to be sacred for one, it has to be a place of grace for all. If we are just coming here to get cozy and comfortable with God, and not to be challenged to live as the hands and feet of Christ, then we will never change into the people God is forever calling us to be.

And that is the point. To come to a place where we learn about

Jesus and worship him so that we can go out and live like him. As one of my predecessors here at Calvary, the Rev. Larry Loughhead said, "*Why spend money on more church school space, stained glass windows, cushioned pews, and pipe organs? Why? Because it is the same people who appreciate beauty and are inspired by it who in fact feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, and heal the sick.*"¹²

When we meet God here in this sacred place, or any sacred space in our lives, the question for us is this: *do we leave God here when we walk out the doors, or do we take God's presence with us?* As beautiful as a sacred space is, it is not God, it is only a means by which we experience God and are challenged to enact God's love in all we do and say.

Solomon and the Israelites certainly learned this. All of Solomon's wives and his wealth proved fleeting. They only lasted as long as his life, and his kingdom barely lasted longer than that. Solomon's wisdom was unable to recognize or prevent the civil war among his sons which

¹² Rev. Larry Loughhead was the Senior Pastor of Calvary Baptist Church of Denver from 1969-1992.

would split the kingdom in two. And the physical Temple itself lasted three centuries, before being stripped and torn down in 586 BCE by the Babylonians. Its destruction led to a spiritual crisis in Israel. If God dwelled in the Temple, did its destruction mean that God had abandoned them?¹³

They learned that rebuilding the Temple did not, and could not fully answer this concern. Sacred space points us to God, but it does not prove God's existence or promise us a life without struggle. Faith requires us to trust in the presence of God dwelling within us to make it through all the ups and downs of life.

You are a walking sacred expression of God's love. Your very life is a sacred space where God's love comes alive here on earth. And each of our lives is crucial in building the ultimate sacred space – the kingdom of God as Jesus called it, or the Cathedral of the Dreamer, as Robert Benson calls it.

I'd like to close by reading you excerpts of Benson's book, *Between the Dreaming and the*

Coming True: The Road Home to God because he writes so beautifully about sacred space – and the faces that create it:

“I spent an afternoon once wandering and wondering in the plaza of a great cathedral in Germany. There was a lot to wonder about there – the sheer beauty of the place, the crowds of people who had come from all over the world to see such a thing, the architecture, and the workmanship itself. But what I found myself wondering about mostly that day, and still do, is the people who built it. And the people who dreamed it.

My working knowledge of the actual process of cathedral building is pretty limited. However, it does seem reasonable to assume that if it took a couple of hundred years or so to build one, then the people who dreamed it up never actually saw it completed. In fact, whole generations would have passed between the time the dream was dreamed and the time the choir made its first grand processional through the nave to the great high altar that the dreamers had envisioned.

Somewhere there must be stories of families who worked on a cathedral for generations. I suspect there are stories of neighbors and schoolmates, whole villages even, who spent their entire lives as stonemasons and woodworkers and ditchdiggers and carpenters for the cathedral. Stories of people who cut the glass that went into the windows

¹³ Bellan-Boyer, *ibid.*

that a neighbor's cousin had cut the stones for back before their grandfather was born.

A cathedral is a testimony to a lot of the best things about us: creativity, hard work, devotion, patience, craftsmanship, ingenuity. But it is also a testimony to dreams and those who believe in them. Someone dreams of a great house of worship, and someone else dreams of where it might be built. Someone dreams of where to find the stone for it, and then somebody dreams up a scheme to acquire the land rights. Then a whole lot of somebodies get caught up in the tide of the great dream and start cutting stones and hauling logs, raising money and driving nails, negotiating contracts and pounding iron. Whatever else such people are; they are dreamers.

If you had asked any one of those who built the cathedral at Cologne what they were, the answers would most likely not have been very poetic: 'I am a carpenter'; 'I am a blacksmith'; 'I am only a seamstress'; 'Just a stonecutter.'

If you ask God, you would hear something very different, I expect. For without them, there is no cathedral."¹⁴

"...We do not talk much about building cathedrals these days. But we should, I think.

Saint Paul once wrote to his friends in Ephesus that there is a 'spiritual dwelling for God' being built among us and that we all are a part of it. A

great temple, Saint Paul called it – a cathedral, I call it – that was dreamed by the Dreamer and is meant for us to build.

Its foundation was laid by the prophets and the apostles, by the early church and the desert fathers and mothers, by the saints who are revered and the saints whose names are unknown to us. The cathedral that is being built here includes all of them and all of us, all who have gone before and all who will come after. We, and all that we are – dreams, hopes, gifts, hours, days, work sweat – are meant to be stones in the cathedral of the Dreamer.

In many ways, it does not matter whether we are preachers or poets, stonecutters or schoolteachers, accountants or architects. Nor does it particularly matter if we are woodworkers or watch carriers, missionaries or metalworkers. What matters is that we dream our dreams and hope our hopes and do our work as though we believe in [God who is] the Dreamer and [God's] dream for the cathedral that is being built here, [the kingdom of God]. For without us, it will not be built."¹⁵

[As we were leaving the Cathedral in Germany that day, after absorbing its beauty for 3 hours, my wife said]: 'Oh my,' she whispered, without ever turning her eyes toward me. 'That someone would do something like this for the glory of God.'

...If I am to do anything 'like this for the glory of God,' it will have to be at my house, in my work, with my

¹⁴ Benson, 85-87.

¹⁵ Benson, 91-92.

dreams. And if it not completed, I will be in good company. The biggest cathedral I have ever seen is still under construction. [And ultimately,] the Cathedral of the Dreamer is still being imagined into being.

On the wall of one of the cathedral bays at Saint John's, the one called the Poet's Corner, there is an inscription carved into the stone that quotes Willa Cather: 'Thy will be done in art as it is in heaven.' Amen, I say. And in plumbing and paper pushing and publishing as well. And in teaching and board-membering and doctoring and bricklaying, for that matter. Or in whatever else it turns out is the work that you and I are given to do by the One who is looking forward to seeing our 'stone' in the long-awaited Cathedral. The work that we do for the Cathedral is in front of us each day. It is in the work that we do for each other, with each other, and beside each other. It is work that we can and must do 'for the sake of the One who came among us as one who serves.'

Not because we will see the Cathedral in our lifetime or even see our own work completed or because we will be hailed as the cornerstone itself, but because it is part and parcel of the reason [God,] the Dreamer, sent us here."¹⁶

"... We do not often see the place we are standing as holy ground. But the fault does not lie with the ground; it lies with us. We do not always see the saints among us, either, but that

is because we do not see what it is we are looking at.

We do not always see that we should be moving about our days and lives and places with awe and reverence and wonder, with the same soft steps with which we enter the room of a sleeping child or the mysterious silence of a cathedral. There is no ground that is not holy ground. All of the places in our lives are sanctuaries; some of them just happen to have steeples. And all of the people in our lives are saints; it is just that some of them have day jobs and most will never have feast days named for them."¹⁷

We are the dreamers...
the Cathedral builders...
the keepers of sacred space...
and the people who are,
through *our* lives, the very
builders of the greatest
Cathedral or Temple of all – the
Kin-dom of God, where not just
all are welcome, all are
essential.

Amen.

¹⁶ Benson, 93-97.

¹⁷ Benson, 140-141.