

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
31 October 2021

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Building Buildings that Beckon, not Box In”

Third sermon in the 6-week series: *Table of Abundance*

1 Kings 5:1-5; 8:1-13

New Revised Standard Version

One of my favorite spiritual writers, Robert Benson, says, “*We are not here to show something to God. We are here because God has something to show to us.*”¹

Sacred spaces and sanctuaries reveal something to us about God, I think. And, ourselves. Otherwise we wouldn’t be drawn to keep coming back to them time and time again.

This is probably more of a statement about us as people than it is about God, but there do seem to be physical places where God seems to dwell more obviously and powerfully, or at least where God is more palpably felt.

In today’s text, we learn of one such place. In addition to his wisdom, King Solomon is best known for building the Temple, the official dwelling place of God for the entire nation of

Israel (all twelve tribes), the first permanent place of worship for God’s people.

The building of the temple is a major turning point in the history and religion of Israel. This massive construction project has been “on deck” since 2 Samuel 7 when, Solomon’s father, King David (the singer-song-writer shepherd boy who we saw anointed last week as King – yes, a lot of time has passed in one week!), learns *he* will *not* build the temple for God because the Lord has “no need for a permanent residence” (at that moment anyway) (vs 4-7), and therefore the task will fall to his son (vs 12-13). 1 Kings 5 and 1 Chronicles 22 have a different take on the situation: there we learn that God wouldn’t *allow David* to build the temple because he had too much blood on his hands; too much warfare.² Either way, the task of building and

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

²Brent A. Strawn, “Commentary on 1 Kings 5:1-5; 8:1-13,” *Working Preacher* (29 Oct. 2017), accessed on 31 Oct. 2021 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrativ>

dedicating the temple falls to Solomon, David's son, and the project begins in 1 Kings 5:1 and really dominates much of the narrative about Solomon's reign.

In 1 Kings 5:1-5, we learn that the construction of the temple is spurred on, in part, by the support of a foreign king, Hiram of Tyre. Hiram had been loyal to David (vs 1) and Solomon capitalizes on this friendship after David's death by taking the king into his confidence about the temple project (vs 5), largely because he wants the cedars of Lebanon as construction material (vs 6).³

It is worth noting, that the temple for Israel's God will be built with some materials from foreign soil. A subtle note, but foundational for how we understand the theology of the buildings we build to experience the presence of God. Even in a time when Israel understood itself to be in covenantal relationship with God, *even then*, the place that would come to symbolize the presence of God – was not exclusive to one country or nation.

Interestingly, King Hiram actually takes a moment to bless the LORD, *Israel's God*, when he receives the news from Solomon that the Temple (of which David dreamed) is finally being built! Isn't it wonderful how building things together (working together on things) – even with people very different than us – can beckon us into deeper relationship with one another, and perhaps into a greater understanding of another's faith or life or perspective? In this case construction of the Temple leads to the constructing of faith, at least for one neighboring king and kingdom!

In today's reading, we only hear parts of the story of how the building got built, but the three chapters between 1 Kings 5 and 8 detail Solomon's grand project, with verses upon verses of specifics related to the architectural and decorative elements of the Temple. You construction engineers and interior designers and handyman types and HGTV junkies...you can all geek out by reading those three chapters on your own time, but here's the time-lapsed version: It took seven years to finish the construction

e-lectionary/solomons-temple-2/commentary-on-1-kings-51-5-81-13.

³ Strawn, *ibid*.

(which is not that bad considering they didn't have big machines like we do). Solomon used the finest of materials: the cedars of Lebanon, cypress wood, gold, silver, bronze, and huge blocks of cut and dressed stone. Master craftsmen carve into the walls of the Temple elaborate decorations of cherubim (angels), palm trees, and flowers. And everything – even the floor – is overlaid with gold.⁴ It would have been, no doubt, on the cover of *Architectural Digest*, for sure.

When the physical structure was complete, Solomon has the priests bring in the Ark of the Covenant (the structure that housed the tablets of the 10 commandments). And as soon as the priests put the Ark in its place, a cloud fills the Temple and the glory of the Lord is everywhere (vs 10).

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 gave Moses the Law (Ex. 24:15-18). It is the same cloud that settled on the Tabernacle, the movable sanctuary, by which the Lord was said to be present with the Israelites as they moved around wandering in the wilderness (Ex. 40:34-38).⁵

So, let's pause for a quick trip down memory lane here. Because in our faith journeys, when we feel like we are walking in circles and perhaps not getting anywhere or at least not getting to our destination on time or via our preferred route (which, let's be honest, is always non-stop!), it's super important for us to remember that, "the Israelites began as a *nomadic* people. Rather than rooting their identity in a particular *place*, the early Israelites shared an identity based upon a common *ancestry*—their descent from Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, who was called Israel."⁶ Their spiritual lives were defined by their connection to one another (their kin-ship), rather than by

⁴ 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.

⁵ Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

⁶ Amy Lindeman Allen, "The Politics of Sacred Structures in 1 Kings 5:1-5; 8:1-13," *Political Theology* (21 Oct. 2013), accessed on 31 Oct. 2021 at <https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-sacred-structures-in-1-kings-51-5-81-13/>.

their coming together in one place at one time. They would have done well the pandemic; they would've been all over virtual worship from their own couches!

But not having a centralized worship space was unusual for the time because many of Israel's neighbors worshipped gods of particular cities and nation states—deities who were thought to reside in the particular places where their devotees constructed their temples and shrines.⁷

Things were different for the Israelites. God revealed God's self to them in a variety of places and ways, often coming directly to them wherever they were, a la Moses and the Burning Bush! But after God revealed God's self to Moses on Mt. Sinai, rather than waiting for Moses to build a temple on that mountaintop (as he probably would have been want to do), God instructed the people to build a “tabernacle” as the meeting place between God and the people. The word tabernacle, in Hebrew, means “tent.” And though impressive in its proportions and build, the tabernacle was still a *portable*

meeting place for a *wandering* people and their *wandering* God.

Now, “fast-forward about four hundred years. The Israelites are no longer nomadic. David had built a great Kingdom, with many allies, and his son Solomon had succeeded him to the throne and had a lot of success. His goal was to maintain and extend his father's dynasty, so he embarked upon two projects—the construction of a palace to house the royal family in Jerusalem and the construction of a temple to house their God.”⁸

Truth be told, this can be seen as one more extension of the institution of the monarchy in Israel itself, which all along God had had great qualms about. On Israel's part though, the peer pressure from their neighbors and FOMO (fear of missing out) was strong. The construction of the temple was yet another effort to be more like their neighbors who had not only a king, but a stationary king, who lived in a stationary palace, and worshipped a stationary deity.⁹ Wouldn't we all like to be able to know where we could find God when we needed God?

⁷ Allen, *ibid.*

⁸ Allen, *ibid.*

⁹ Allen, *ibid.*

Wouldn't you love to be able to pin God down to a particular place?

And this has political and economic consequences, of course: the Temple ensured that the capitol city (Jerusalem) would be guarded and protected with religious fervor (which we see still to this day), and the city would forever prosper, as people would make pilgrimage to the Temple throughout the year for festival gatherings. Building the Temple meant building a center of power and a Tourist Town to attract the masses. *Even holy and sacred projects can construct consequences on top of the foundation of good and pure intentions.*

Yet in the building of Solomon's Temple we see that God is too great to be contained by any single building, and directly before his grand dedicatory prayer which follows in chapter 8, Solomon himself admits this ironic truth when he says in verse 12, "*The LORD has said that he would dwell in thick darkness.*" (meaning, the presence of the LORD cannot be fully known or contained), followed by his proclamation in verse 13, yet "*I have built you*

an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever."

So...Solomon knows the Spirit of the Lord cannot be contained, and yet here he is standing in a sanctuary space built for the very purpose of containing the very Spirit that he *just* said cannot be contained! Follow *that* logic!

But can we really fault King Solomon? For how many of us love our beloved buildings and precious places of worship? We all know "the church is not the building, it's the people," BUT the past 18 months have taught us how much we really do love and value our building, right? It's a gathering place, a place of refuge and connection, perhaps in our case, not for weary nomads, but for stir-crazy stay-at-homers, eager to finally get out! And we are grateful for our beloved church building. I love this beautiful, sacred space. As Diane Newcom reminded us this morning, the architecture and artwork of this sanctuary lifts our gaze to God and heals our hearts with hope.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the Calvary members, who, before us, imagined and invested in what this building could be. For it indeed beckons

us toward beauty and wonder. And we owe our deepest thanks to each and every dedicated volunteer and staff member who care for this building and who continually work on its upkeep and upgrades. Shout out to Lori Grohskopf and Bill Warren and Charles Hillig and Ken DeHate and Gordon Pelton (and their property team) and Garrett Pelton and Beth Dickinson and Diane Newcom and Corry Doty and her Columbarium Team and many, many others who are indeed caretakers for this sacred place. And we owe a huge pat on the back to each and every one of us who has ever picked up a piece of trash (or a dead squirrel carcass – you can ask me for that story after service), or trimmed a rose bush, hammered a nail, polished some wood, removed some candle wax, stacked up chairs and tables, or *even filled out a pledge card* – because all of these actions keep our building beautiful and cared for, functional and purposeful.

So, of course, we celebrate that we have a building that beckons us to worship God. But if that is all a building does, it is boxing us in to only *one* dimension of our faith, and indeed, only *one*

half of the greatest commandment, which is to love God, and love others.

Although the Temple structure 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 People are most essential, always above property. 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, or even a Christian, to know and experience the presence of the divine and holy. God is just THAT big.

In this stewardship season, as we focus on the Table of God's Abundance that we share, we recognize that ultimately nothing really is “ours”—it all comes from God and belongs to God, and no matter how hard we try we can't take it with us when we die. So just as the most radical question we can ponder in this stewardship season is not

¹⁰ Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

“how much should we give, but how much do we dare keep?”, likewise when we think of the presence of God the question is not *“Where does God reside?”* but rather, *“Is there anywhere that God does NOT reside?”*¹¹

And, of course, the answer is “No.” God is everywhere. In all places, in all persons.

Veni Sancte Spiritus, we sang. “Holy Spirit, come to us.” The Spirit can come to us anywhere at anytime and at any place – and does! AND *this is also true*: there are places where, through collective practice and experience and because of intentional beauty and architecture, we can come to invite in and recognize God’s Spirit more readily. Perhaps sacred spaces are not built to box in our experience of God, or limit our understanding of God; rather, sacred spaces, beautiful church buildings, at their best, are built to beckon us, to invite us, to welcome us into a *repeated* experience and *recognition* of God’s presence in ONE place that can help us more readily recognize and experience God’s presence in ALL places, and, more importantly, in all persons. The

imago dei, image of God, resides in every person, without exception. Including the reflection you see in the mirror each morning.

As we’ll see later in 1 Kings chapter 8, even though the physical building of the Temple cannot contain God’s presence, Solomon knows that *people* need to come there, nonetheless, 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 space that continually reminds us of WHO we are and WHOSE we are, and that reminds us that God’s presence is very close to us and never leave us. It doesn’t have to be a fancy temple or a sanctuary, but it very well may be, and because of that, Solomon wants his people who are listening to his prayer to know that they can come and pray to God in this place. No exceptions. He even welcomes the foreigners into the Temple to pray.

Collectively it is *our* presence that makes this place sacred. We make it sacred. You and me. Our presence. Our prayers. The

¹¹ Allen, *ibid*.

sanctuary's sacred quality is built over time as memories are created, babies are dedicated, children are baptized, youth are blessed at graduation, families share in communion, friends weep and pray together, and as lives are celebrated at memorial services.

We need to come to sanctuaries – virtual and visceral – 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 and love as Jesus lived and loved, then we are boxing ourselves in and missing out on transformation for ourselves and our world.

As one of my beloved predecessors here at Calvary, Senior Pastor from 1969-1992, the Rev. Larry Loughhead said, *"Why spend money on 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."

To this profound statement, I would add, that as a sacred space that is *Open to All and Closed to None*, it is not only the beauty of this sacred space that inspires us, but every person who walks through our doors who inspires us.

We are not just inspired by beauty so that we can better serve the hungry, naked, homeless, and sick. We are in fact inspired by the beautiful children of God who ARE hungry, naked, homeless, and sick. We are inspired by the *perseverance* of the hungry, the *humility* of the naked, the *resourcefulness* of the homeless, and the *courage* of the sick. We learn from one another lessons we cannot learn on our own. For we all hold sacred space for each other and we cannot be healed without each other.

If we are not careful, just by virtue of the fact that we are human and we like our friends and familiarity, this building will lead us to "box in" who has access to God's presence here and the abundance of God's

Table that we've been given to share. We can so easily become protectors of the provisions of God, instead of distributors of the abundance of God. We can so easily become preservers of the presence of God as *we* experience the divine, instead of allowing ourselves to be students of the many facets of the presence of God that we can only learn from other people.

It's easy for a church building to box us in. Indeed, it's why many people leave the church today or never walk through our doors to begin with. It's much harder to allow this building to be the place that beckons us to dream bigger and love more deeply and invite more people in...because that means we have to let go a little bit on our grip of what we think God is up to in this place. God might just be dwelling in thick darkness, in a mystery that we are not yet seeing – a mystery that is still not yet clear to us even with the streaming light coming through our beautiful stained-glass windows. Are we attuned to the presence of God that spills out and beyond this place? That is infinite beyond what we can ask or imagine?

¹² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/box%20in>

According to Miriam-Webster, the definition of “boxed in” is “to surround (someone or something) in such a way that it makes movement difficult.”¹² The definition of “beckon” is “to summon, signal, or invite” to something more.¹³

Our church building can “box us in” the movements of God as they happen just in this one place OR our building can be used as a gathering place that then summons us and invites us to join in the movement of God in the world. Like a terminal at an airport, we gather here, only to depart to somewhere else...again and again and again...week after week after week.

Or to put it bluntly: *do we leave God here when we walk out the doors, or do we take God's presence with us?*

Solomon and the Israelites certainly learned that God's presence cannot be contained or controlled. 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

¹³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/beckon>

war among his sons which 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?¹⁴

The Israelites learned that rebuilding the Temple did not, and could not fully answer this concern – as it fell once again! 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. And faith requires us to be in relationship with one another and in relationship with the God who will never let us go.

As Robert Benson writes,
“... We do not often see the place we are standing on 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.”¹⁵

For all the sanctuaries and saints who have revealed to us the presence of the Divine or have held sacred space for us – we give thanks. And. For all the saints we have yet to share sacred space with, we climb out of our boxes, in search of holy ground...for that is where the Table of Abundance resides...and it is beckoning us all.

Amen.

¹⁴ Bellan-Boyer, *ibid.*

¹⁵ Benson, 140-141.