

## "Holy Places"

Matthew 17:1-9; Exodus 24:12-18; 2 Peter 1:16-19

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*Thus says the LORD:*

*"Heaven is my throne*

*and the earth is my footstool;*

*what is the house that you would build for me,*

*and what is my resting-place?" (Isaiah 66:1)*

Over the centuries people have tried to answer this *rhetorical* question, which was perhaps first addressed to king David. After "the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies" king David looked around and said, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." He intended to build a house for God, but God said, "Are you the one to build me a house to live in?" (2 Sam 7:1-2, 5b). One would think that David would have reflected back on the stories of people like Moses, and seen that God cannot be *placed*. Isn't it absurd to think that one could possibly build anything that could contain the God who revealed himself in burning bush or a pillar of fire or a great cloud (Ex 3:4; 13:21; 24:16)? As Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, "If God is everywhere, [God] cannot be just somewhere. If God has made all things, how can [we] make a thing for [God]?" (Heschel, *The Sabbath* 81)

The answer to all these questions may seem obvious, but (if we look around our sanctuaries) what's obvious is that we still try to confine God (or at least our experience of God) to a specific, beautiful, carefully-crafted place. It is easy to succumb to the notion that, if the music is played *just right*, and the sound system works *just right*, and the candles are lit *just right*, and the sun shines through the stain glass windows *just right*, and everything is said and sung *just right*, God will be *here*. Yet is God more *here* at 10:30AM on Sundays than anywhere else? Is God more *here* than with our brothers and sisters at Westminster Presbyterian or at Christ Episcopal? Is God rushing to get down here from First United Methodist's 9:30AM worship service upstairs? Of course not! If God is someone we can just conjure up whenever we feel like it, then God is not God.

Thankfully, when we read the biblical stories of “holy places,” places where men and women encountered God, it’s evident that such places were never made, only found—stumbled upon—and *then* people staked their claims. Think of Jacob, who camped out in “a certain place” using a stone for his pillow. There in his dreaming he encountered God, and awoke with the affirmation, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” Then he said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven,” and he took his extra-firm pillow and set it up as “a pillar,” a sacred stone and said, “this stone...shall be God’s house” (Gen 28: 10-22). Think of Peter, who, upon seeing Jesus transfigured, transformed, shining with all the brilliance of God, is ready to set up camp. Interrupting Jesus’ conversation with Moses and Elijah, he says, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish I will make three dwelling here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” How absurd, how presumptuous!

Yet isn’t that the way *we* are; we find a place where we’ve encountered God and then stake our claims/set up camp? Allow me to bother you with some thoughts that have bothered me; thoughts that challenge me as much as they may challenge you. I can close my eyes right now and tell you where many of you sit in this sanctuary almost every Sunday morning for worship. You could make the same observation of me; 99.9% of the time I sit lectern-side or pulpit-side. This happens in classrooms, even Sunday school classrooms, even when there are not assigned seats. The most logical explanation I can come up with for this behavior is *comfort*.

One of my favorite sitcoms is *The Big Bang Theory*; and one of the main characters is Sheldon, whose high IQ and compulsive behavior make him both funny and annoying. As any *Big Bang Theory* fan knows, there is one place on the couch that belongs to Sheldon. When their new neighbor, Penny, unknowingly sits in that place, Sheldon says, “That’s where I sit.” “So sit next to me,” says Penny. “No I sit there,” says Sheldon. “What’s the difference,” she asks. “What’s the difference?” He explains:

“In the wintertime that seat is close enough to the radiator to remain warm and yet not so close as to cause perspiration. In the summer it’s directly in the path of a cross breeze created by opening windows there, and there. It faces the television at an angle that is neither direct, thus discouraging conversation, nor so far wide to create a parallax distortion. I could go on, but...I think I’ve made my point.”

(Series 1, Episode One--<http://bigbangtrans.wordpress.com/>)

Sheldon's claim to that particular place on the couch is based on comfort, and I wonder if it's not the same with us when it comes to where we sit in this sanctuary. Perhaps the furniture may not be comfortable, but where we are accustomed to sitting *is*. And you may be thinking that where we sit is not important, and you'd be right; however, our tendency to sit in the same places may be indicative of our greater tendency to try to confine God (and our experience of God) to one particular place. Given that tendency, what makes me *uncomfortable* is this thought: "Is it possible that God, like lightning, may not strike the exact same place twice?" What a humbling, frustrating, even terrifying thought for all the congregations (including ours) which have spent vast amounts of money creating and maintaining large houses of worship! Or perhaps it is *not* so disconcerting.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, maybe we're fine with the God we know, the God who is predictable and punctual; and maybe we don't want to be exposed to a God who is otherwise. Perhaps it is not only a matter of comfort, but also a matter of *safety*. Madeleine L'Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, once wrote:

"As I read the Old and New Testaments I am struck by the awareness therein of our lives being connected with cosmic powers, angels, and archangels, heavenly principalities and powers, and the groaning of creation. It's too radical, too uncontrolled for many of us, so we build churches which are the safest possible places in which to escape God."

(*The Irrational Season*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1977).

We call this a "sanctuary," which can not only mean "a holy place," but also "a place of refuge or safety" (OED). The challenging question is, "From what or from whom do we seek refuge and safety when we gather together in this place?" If the answer is "God," then we are deceiving ourselves. We cannot escape God. There is no sanctuary from God. As the psalmist has written:

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. (Psalm 139:7-10)

To affirm these words is to affirm God's limitless presence, which dispels any fears about our personal comfort or safety, and allows us to worship God *anywhere*. Even as we build houses of worship, we must always keep in mind such wisdom. The temple that king David sought to build *was* eventually built by his son, Solomon; yet after the project was completed, he wisely acknowledge in prayer that "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kgs 8:27b).

So we must gather in this place not only with the confidence that we shall meet God here, but also with the humility that this is not the only place we shall meet God. In the midst of a conversation with a Samaritan woman, the subject of worship came up, and Jesus said, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain or in Jerusalem...But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth..." (John 4:21, 23a). Friends, there is no place that God cannot meet us, there is no place that cannot be made holy by God's presence.

Billy Strayhorn, arguably the greatest jazz man to come out of Dayton, once wrote a piece called, *Lush Life*. And though it is a song signaling heartbreak, there's a line in the closing that seems resilient, almost triumphant, that says, "I'll live a lush life in some small dive." For us, perhaps even for Strayhorn, the heart of a "lush life" is a life with God, and it can happen anywhere—a prison, a homeless shelter, a mansion, a street corner, a concentration camp, a sanctuary, a dining hall, a mountain top, "some small dive," or a garden.

"While [Peter] was still speaking...a voice [from the cloud] said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Despite Peter's desire to camp out on the mountain in the glow of God's Beloved, and despite our desire for comfort and safety, obeying God and listening to Jesus guarantees nothing of these things: "As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them to '[t]ell no one about the vision until after [he had] been raised from the dead'" (Mt 17:9), reminding them that danger and death was still ahead. Listening to him, will lead these same three men—Peter, James and John—from the bright mountain top to the darkest valley, the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:30-56). Yet even there, "deeply grieved, even to death," Jesus could call out to God his Father. There is no place that God cannot meet us.

The season of Lent is upon us, and though we know that the great love of Jesus, God's Son, the Beloved led him beyond the garden to suffer and die on a cross, we also live with the assurance that Jesus could not be *placed*. We live in the hope and faith that the one who was transfigured,

transformed and shone with all the brilliance of God could not be confined to some tomb, but “has been raised from the dead.” Like Peter, let this good news be our testimony and our source of worship wherever we go, “a lamp shining in a dark place” (2 Pet 1:19b). Amen.