

“God Provides a Holy House”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 31, 2021

Reformation Sunday

Psalm 84:1-4, 10-12

Rev. John Wahl

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

Up to this point in the Old Testament story, the Israelites have kept their holy religious items in a tent – called the tabernacle – that they could move with them during their desert wanderings. But now it is time for the Ark of the Covenant to have a permanent home; and for the people to have a permanent place to come for worship.

Today’s readings describe the decision to begin the construction of – and then, the dedication of – King Solomon’s Temple. Of course, it is not really Solomon’s Temple; it is God’s Temple. Though, if you read the fully story, from chapter 5 through chapter 8, it certainly seems like Solomon makes sure to put himself at the center of attention. He’s like the politician who speaks way too long at the ribbon-cutting ceremony; like the mega-donor who makes sure the new wing bears his name.¹

Listen for God’s word: *Read I Kings 5:1-5, 8:1-13*

The building of the Temple was a huge and expensive, seven-year project of Solomon. Like much of today’s construction, materials were procured and created elsewhere and brought to the building site where they were assembled and installed. It was replete with rich furnishings and decorations made of the finest materials; gold was everywhere, inside and out.

Chapter 8 describes the installation of the artifacts of the Israelites’ worship, including the Ark (the chest holding the two tablets of the Ten Commandments) and the entire tabernacle. It’s new, permanent home will be inside the Temple.

Some of the details we read – and this is only a small piece of the whole story – might seem strange; like, what are the cherubs: these winged creatures? Why did they make the poles too tall to properly fit inside the Temple? And what is the reason behind sacrificing too many animals to even count?

¹ Joanna Harader, “Tangents, So Little Time” from *Rev Gal Pals*

In the tenth verse, we hear that a cloud enters the holy space and becomes so thick with God's glory that the priests are unable to complete their sacred tasks. In verse 12, Solomon says, "the Lord said that he would live in a dark cloud," then follows that up, in verse 13, by saying, "I have built you a lofty temple as a house where you can live forever." Is Solomon's Temple a gift for God, or an attempt to manage God?

Over time, the Temple came – in many ways – to represent the people of Israel. It was a reflection of their identity and of the nature of their relationship with God. For, now, there was a permanent place, a holy house, for God to live forever. And yet, inside that grand, ornate house were the Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle tent – the same holy elements that used to be carried from place to place.

If God really is like a dark cloud whose glory fills whatever space God chooses, then the walls of the Temple will not, and cannot, contain or control God. We wonder whether Solomon understands this ambiguity: that while we try to construct holy spaces where God can be found, God is free to go wherever God wants. God seems not to be displeased with Solomon; God does not refuse to enter into the Temple, but the dark cloud which disrupts the priestly duties serves as a reminder that we really do not build our holy houses as some permanent residence for the divine, but as a place where we can go to help us better listen for, and hear, God's word.²

We Presbyterians – as a part of the Protestant, Reformed tradition – pride ourselves on not caring too much about superficial things like buildings or their ornate furnishings. When we walk into Catholic or Orthodox or Episcopal churches we can be overwhelmed by their sights and smells: the statues and icons, the candles and incense. Still, people more at home in other traditions might similarly question the need for our tall steeple or massive cross.

If we construct and furnish sacred spaces as an attempt to manage or control the Holy, we are building in vain. Because the almighty God cannot be contained in any room or building. If, on the other hand, we create and inhabit sacred spaces as a way to open ourselves more fully to the presence of God, our efforts will be welcomed and honored; we will see or hear or somehow be assured that God is, indeed, with us.

During the past year and a half, we have been confronted with new – or maybe not so new – questions about sacred spaces. When our sanctuary doors closed, and most of us – apart from a handful of worship leaders – faced the prospect of virtual worship within our homes, our conceptions of what makes a place holy were forced to change. All of a sudden, we told one another that the gathering of God's people – which is the root meaning of "church" – no longer necessarily meant being in-person,

² Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

face-to-face. We continued to sing and pray, to read scripture and share the Lord's Supper; only, now – for example – at kitchen tables, wearing bathrobes, and with bagels and orange juice.

Now, we are gathering for in-person worship again; while also welcoming in those who continue to join virtually. Our convictions about where we find holy space may not be so clear. While some of us were missing the colors and symbols and grandeur of the sanctuary and might too easily get distracted being at home; others appreciate the quiet or comfort or easy access of remote worship. Since we are all different, it makes sense that our holy spaces will be different; that some of us will listen better sitting on pews and others on sofas; that some might respond to icons, incense and ornate alters while others need blank walls and a single, unscented candle.

Whether he meant to do so or not, Solomon articulated this ambiguity most of us feel about our worship of God. We know, in our minds, that God is not contained to any single – or expected – place; that God is like a dark cloud that can move in or out and is beyond our ability to control. And yet, in our hearts, we feel God's presence more strongly and viscerally in some spaces than others. God speaks to some through the wonders of nature, to others through arts and music, to still others through acts of service. Some of us pray best in a chorus of voices; while others when it is only our own speaking.

We are, now, at a moment in time when each of these choices are available to us. It may have always been true, of course, that we could worship God in all these different places and ways. But, now, having been forced to consider that God's presence might be found in alternate spaces, the idea of a holy house – a sanctuary – takes on new meaning. This state of not knowing can be uncomfortable; it certainly has most church leaders nervous about how many people might be coming back to worship, and when. And yet, it is forcing us to ask important questions about who God is and – in this day – who we, as God's people, are called to be.

Author Susan Beaumont calls times like these “liminal seasons” – when the old ways of doing things may not be working but the way forward is not yet clear. This uncertainty about the future fuels doubt and chaos.³ No-one particularly likes these liminal times; we would rather be moving toward a defined goal. But Beaumont reminds her readers that it is in the liminal seasons – when the cloud has descended and we can't see clearly – that we are often closest to God. It is, instead, when we have a plan and defined course of action – when there are rituals and traditions to guide us – that we stop paying attention to God.

³ Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*

Each year, on the 31st of October, Protestant Christians celebrate Reformation Day. It may not be quite as popular a celebration as Halloween, but it is important to our tradition. As people of the Reformed tradition, we believe the church – not just, but including our congregation – is both reformed and always reforming. We remember that we are always in a liminal season and that we are maybe closest to God when considering how God might be changing us.

The measure of a holy space is not the presence of God; because God is fully present everywhere. What make a space – or a season – holy is how present *we are* to God's presence. We are on the verge of entering into a holy season right now. That is what "holidays" means, right? Holy days. I realize that for many of us, the pressure to buy gifts and send cards and travel and balance family obligations can be stressful; the "holy days" can feel anything but.

And so, I urge you to consider this question: where is your temple, your sanctuary, your sacred space during this holy and hectic season? What space can you create – what space in time, what physical place – that will allow you to listen to and hear the voice of God?

Maybe your space requires vibrant sights and smells; festive music and crowded rooms. Maybe your space involves a cold wind and open trail. Maybe your space is a quiet time in the morning or a day of retreat or brief breaks whenever you feel overwhelmed. Maybe your space is here, in this sanctuary, in-person or virtually, on Sunday mornings.

For many of us, this holy space – in time and place, this gathering of God's people in this congregation – is important. Even in a liminal season, we have decided that this church – what it gives to the world, and what it offers to us – is worth our time and effort. We understand that this temple, this permanent structure, houses within it the holiness of God; that which moves in and out like a dark cloud; so holy is it that sometimes interrupts our priestly tasks. Yes, God *can be* found everywhere, but – for us – God *has been* found right here.

And so, I encourage you – as we will soon enter the season of holidays, holy days – to find your temples. To make time for them and tend to them. To even build them yourselves if necessary. And to go to them, often. Go and find stillness in the holy house – even within the liminality – and then, listen. Amen.