

Holy People, Holy Places

*A Sermon Preached by The Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Third Sunday in Lent~March, 11 2018*

Exodus 20:1-17

God spoke all these words to Moses on Mount Sinai: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

Psalms 19

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| 1 The heavens declare your glory, O God, *
and the firmament shows your handiwork. | 8 Your statutes are just and rejoice the heart; *
your commandment is clear and gives light to the eyes. |
| 2 One day tells its tale to another, *
and one night imparts knowledge to another. | 9 The fear of you is clean and endures for ever; *
your judgments are true and righteous altogether. |
| 3 Although they have no words or language, *
and their voices are not heard, | 10 More to be desired are they than gold,
more than much fine gold, *
sweeter far than honey, than honey in the comb. |
| 4 Their sound has gone out into all lands, *
and their message to the ends of the world. | 11 By them also is your servant enlightened, *
and in keeping them there is great reward. |
| 5 In the deep you have set a pavilion for the sun; *
it comes forth like a bridegroom out of his chamber;
it rejoices like a champion to run its course. | 12 Who can tell how often one offends? *
Cleanse me from my secret faults. |
| 6 It goes forth from the uttermost edge of the heavens
and runs about to the end of it again; *
nothing is hidden from its burning heat. | 13 Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins;
let them not get dominion over me; *
then shall I be whole and sound,
and innocent of a great offense. |
| 7 Your law, O God, is perfect and revives the soul; *
your testimony is sure and gives wisdom to the
innocent. | 14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my
heart be acceptable in your sight, *
O God, my strength and my redeemer. |

I Corinthians 1:18-25

The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the

wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

This morning we encounter a Jesus who probably shakes all our ideas of him. No gentle Jesus meek and mild here-instead a table turning, whip wielding, people turfing, angry man. Why? What could drive this ever compassionate man to this extreme? Well, when Jesus loses his temper, it is usually about injustice or about religious people acting in ways opposed to God's will. This morning it is a little of both. But why does Jesus get so riled up about people defiling the Temple?

Some 1000 years before, David, the Great King of Israel had dreamed of a house for God. God, you see, traveled around with the Israelites in a tent. Which was fine, but David was concerned that it really was not a grand enough abode for the Lord God Almighty. David himself never got around to it, but he mentioned it pretty frequently to his son and heir, Solomon. So, after David's death, Solomon set around to building a great, great house...for himself. He built the finest palace ever seen in those parts, made of great cedar beams and filled with all the latest luxuries. Until one morning when Solomon stepped out onto his roof deck and looked across his kingdom. It was a perfect day-sky bright blue, gentle breeze, the smell of flowers in the air. He was pleased. Until he heard the echo of his father's voice and it dawned on him that he was living in a great palace, but God was still in a tent. So Solomon set out to build a great house for God- the Temple-the greatest building ever built.

For those of us who have grown up in a country with churches or other houses of worship on every street corner, this doesn't seem like a big deal. But this was not just another church. This was the ONLY place for worship in Israel. It was quite literally God's House. The theology of the Temple was not that it was just a great place where people showed up to pray, sing, and worship. It was the dwelling place of God-deep within the Temple-in the Holy of Holies- was the Ark of the Covenant. And it was there, in that building, in the midst of the city, in the midst of the people, that God actually dwelt. Right among God's people. It is important that we grasp this, because, if we don't, if we don't understand that the Temple was literally God's dwelling then we miss the jaw dropping statement Jesus makes when he identifies himself as the Temple. Identifies himself as THE place where the Presence of God dwells among God's people.

While it was shocking in the moment, this was surely good news to the people hearing the story after the Temple was destroyed by Rome. While that Temple was gone, they had a living, breathing Temple: Jesus. Through him they, we, had a deep connection to God. Through him.

Now, I have been thinking a lot about buildings lately. Not temples per se, but buildings. As you know, we at St. Peter's have been talking about, thinking about, dreaming about a building on the parking lot for over 70 years. And we are now in the midst of a campaign to build space for us to deepen the bonds of relationship within the church community and enable us to serve those around us-our neighborhood, our city in new and different ways. This is more than just a good idea-this is our call as Christians-to walk life's journey with each other and support each other-to be, with God, repairers of the wrecked relationships in the world-all those injustices that lead to some of God's beloved being second or worse class citizens.

We have a healthy parish with new people coming through our doors regularly. We have multiple generations worshiping and working together. We have small groups that are grappling with faith together, supporting each other, learning what it is to be disciples together. These are things many church communities would give their eye-teeth for. And that is a great and wonderful thing. Still, I have to say, as healthy as we are, we are sorely hampered by our lack of space. A lack that hampers

our ability to make deeper connections with other than a few people in our church sphere. A lack that hampers our ability to offer hospitality to others, to give children-many children a robust after school program and a good start to life, to offer robust educational and intergenerational programs, and to feed as many people as we could,. This lack of space is distorting, de-forming our life in community. I saw an image one day recently of a sea turtle that had become trapped in one of those plastic ring 6 pack holders- it was alive and swimming, but it was distorted-a distortion that would eventually lead to death.

I don't want to be overly dramatic, but from where I sit, with an eye on the depressing statistics of declining numbers at main line churches, I am concerned. The church in the future will look like, will be, quite different. My hunch is that we will have a lot less church buildings, but we will always need "magnet" churches-larger parishes that are engaging each other and the communities around them in transformative ways. St. Peter's already is and needs to continue to be one of those places. This neighborhood, this city, need it to be one of those places. And to ensure that, as well as for our current needs, we need space-to dream, to creatively grow into God's call, Gods future. That's the vision we have come to as a community, the vision you, through your vestry and so many others have been working to birth into being.

I know some of you are ambivalent about the whole idea-bothered by the thought of raising a lot of money for a building. Well, I have to say, part of me is right there with you-I have struggled with this. On some level it feels selfish, wasteful. And yet, without more space I am convinced we simply cannot be who God wants and needs us to be- and space costs money. Further, the building isn't the goal, the goal is all a building will allow us to be. I am aware that in this time of upheaval, it may seem odd to put money into space rather than into causes dear to our hearts. But a Christian community learning, growing, and serving together is an instrument of transformation; partners with God in repairing and rebuilding the world. It is through the transformation that takes place in the lives of individuals and in a community of faith that the world is transformed. Here we discover what our collective and individual call is, how we are called to change some piece of the world and we go forth from here strengthened and encouraged to do whatever we are called to do. We are a learning lab for justice, peace, relationship building and community. And the world is in desperate need of these things.

So here's the thing, just as God is incarnate in human life, in non-human creatures, in the world- So God also seems to inhabit certain places-God filled places-like this sanctuary. Like a building filled with people deepening relationship and sharing the journey, feeding and getting to know those who are fed, mentoring children and doing other things God has already dreamed for us to do. As noted scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, "the people Israel will be and always must be concerned with actual footage in a place that is a repository for commitment and therefore identity."

While it is true that we do not believe God dwells in a particular place, but is incarnate in and through the world, God still needs bodies, places, spaces to inhabit. Holy spaces where we encounter each other and the Holy One. Spaces where we learn how to be Christ's hands, heart, and feet in the world, and then get to practice it in the heart of our spiritual home.