

“Sacred Space”
Rev. Gloria G. Hopewell, D.Min.

1 Kings 8: 1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43
Psalm 84

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
August 26, 2012

It had been nearly seven years. Seven long years of designing and building, decorating and finishing, but the Temple in Jerusalem was completed, Solomon’s most magnificent work accomplished. This temple would be the center of Israel’s worship for over three hundred years. According to today’s standards, it was not so terribly great in size, but for 953 BCE – nearly 3,000 years ago – it was a splendid structure. Solomon had employed the most famous Phoenician architects and builders from Tyre and Sidon. The temple was paneled in costly cedar and olivewood and tapestries, and lavishly embellished with carvings and pure gold.

The building was similar in style to other temples of that period. Outside in the courtyard were altars for the sacrifice of animals. There was a narrow outer porch that served as the solemn entranceway. Then several steps up was the main chamber or *holy* that held continually burning lamps and an altar of incense and blessed bread.

This was the place where worshippers gathered – in those days of course that meant only men – only Jewish men. From within this *holy place*, more steps lead to a curtained and dark, windowless chamber, the *holy of holies*, or inner sanctuary where the Ark of the Covenant would reside. No one ever entered that chamber except that once each year on the Day of Atonement the high priest went in and uttered God’s real name. That name is now lost to us. [It is said that a rope would be tied to his ankle when he entered the chamber so that if he died in the holy presence of YHWH, he could be pulled out without some unauth-ORIZED person needing to go in after him. For anyone else who entered would surely die.]

The day of the Temple dedication was in the fall, probably during the Feast of Tabernacles, which was a harvest festival and celebration of the renewal of the God’s covenant with the people at Mt. Sinai where Moses received the Ten Commandments. The main event here was bringing the Ark of the Covenant containing the stone tablets into its first permanent resting place in the Temple on Mt. Zion, remembering God’s later covenant with David and his descendants. Remember a few weeks ago – at Mass in the Grass – we talked about David dancing before the Ark as he brought it to Jerusalem and how since the time of Moses, the Ark had been housed in a tent when it wasn’t being carried from place to place through the wilderness or into battle ahead of the warriors. God did not allow David to build a Temple, so the Ark remained in the tent until now.

On this day, we can imagine great pomp and circumstance, and singing and dancing as the procession entered. The priests carried the Ark to its place in the *holy of holies* beneath the wings of the stone-sculpted cherubim and then emerged to begin the ceremony of dedication. Suddenly, the whole temple filled up with a cloud. A cloud so dense and pervasive that they could not see to carry out their sacred functions! Can't you just see it? All of the dignitaries in their best robes and shawls, full of importance? Looking at this cloud descending. Wondering what is going on. Perhaps in their amazement the cloud brought to mind stories of Moses and the Exodus when the pillar of cloud that symbolized the presence of God went before the people as they wandered through the wilderness and rested above the tabernacle when they were still. Perhaps they even *expected* a cloud of God's presence on this auspicious day – a shimmering, radiant cloud, maybe backlit with rays of gold. A cloud congratulating them on a job well done and urging them to be about their important work. Not a dark, brooding cloud that hung over them like a fog.

Perhaps these priests came to recognize that God was reminding them not to get carried away with themselves and their rituals. "I allowed you to build this Temple," God might have said, "but don't forget what this is all about. Don't forget me! I will dwell with you as I always have, but don't think you can contain me in a building!" And to give Solomon credit, he did not make that mistake. In his prayer, he says, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built." God dwells with us but transcends human boundaries. God chooses to be present but cannot be confined in any way.

From the beginning of time, it seems that human beings have had a need to build structures to God's glory. Abraham and Jacob built sacred shrines to commemorate their experiences of God's presence. And people traveled to them to experience these holy places. Our psalm today was probably sung by the people as they traveled to the Temple for worship. It is a song of praise for God's house. A song of anticipation and excitement.

We need the shrines, the magnificent cathedrals and synagogues and mosques, the tiny chapels and the neighborhood churches – places of splendor and places of simple beauty – built to the glory of God. God does not need them just as God is not contained within them. We need them. And we need, it seems, to create beauty with our human hands and minds – the architecture, the music, the art, the poetry that engages all of our senses, connecting us with the joy and hope of all humanity as we reach toward God.

And this is good. It is good to offer up to God all of the best of our gifts and talents. Where we go wrong is when we forget the main point and begin to look to satisfy only our own needs for feeling good or being entertained instead of worshipping God. It is then that our buildings, our music, and even our worship, become idols.

Still, I confess to a jolt of pleasure each time I walk down the hill and see this church with its red doors and gothic bell tower. And like all of us, I have fond feelings about church buildings filled with memories of people and life-changing events, buildings that felt like shelter, a home-away-from-home.

We do need our buildings and our music and our art. We need these places where we can pray and touch God and be touched by God. God knows we need all the help we can get to turn off the noise of our chaotic world, to focus ourselves on the One who gives us life.

We need the buildings, too, as gathering places for the people of God. How often have you heard people say, “I don’t need to go to church. I can pray to God just as well in the mountains, or on the beach, or on the golf course.”? Well, they are wrong. Certainly, they can pray just as well in these places. But that is private devotion. Don’t misunderstand. We need private devotion. Even Jesus went off by himself for renewal. And there is no doubt that God’s creation – the lofty mountains and the forest glades and the bubbling brook – far surpass in splendor our human efforts. We may even feel God’s presence most intensely in the midst of such wonder. But private devotion is not enough. When we are filled with such awe, we need to return to the gathered community of faith. For the church *is* the community of faith. And what we do here together is of enormous importance. If we are only alone, we are in danger of turning inward and focusing solely on our own struggles. When we worship together, we have the chance to learn from each other, to share struggles *and* visions and to grow in our love for God and for one another. We then carry God’s love back out into our homes and workplaces where we can make a difference in our world.

Solomon knew that God did not live in the Temple. God could not be placed inside the Ark and brought out at the people’s or the priest’s convenience. Solomon’s dedication prayer was for God’s presence to be made known in that place and for the Temple to be a place where the people’s prayers would be heard. But not only the prayers of the faithful. He asked God to hear the prayers of the foreigners, too – the strangers – who would sense, just by seeing the Temple, the power and presence of God, and be drawn to God just as the people of Israel were.

It’s like our churches today. Whether they have tall, narrow spires that thrust above the treetops into the sky, domes that glow with the rays of the sun, or towers that light up the night, they are beacons of hope in a hurting world. A sign to us and to the stranger that God is present and will hear our prayers. An invitation to come through the doors to offer praise and thanksgiving to the living God who is in the midst of our community of faith in this sanctuary and within each one of us as we go out from this place.

What if we shifted our perspective a bit? Not replaced it but opened it up. What if we thought of this church not just as a “home-away-from-home” or our “heritage” filled with history and memories but as a sign of hope for our neighborhood, our city – our

world? What difference might that make in the ministries of this church? What if we were like those singing as they traveled to the Temple, excited about coming to worship? And those songs poured out of our cars, the buses, or onto the streets where we walked? "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God."

And what if our cups were so filled in worship in this place that they spilled over and splashed all around us so that others were splattered and wanted to know where to find more?

Amen and amen.