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Joint Service—Bridge Street United Church and St. Matthew’s United Church  
August 25, 2024

Readings: I Kings 8: 14-30, 54-61; Psalm 84

### On God and Sacred Space

After my mother’s death in the winter of 1999, Caroline and I spent much of our vacation time in the summers of 1999 and 2000 clearing out my family home. I am an only child, so the task was up to Caroline and me. Being an only child has the disadvantage of no one with whom to share the work, and the advantage of no one to disagree with the decisions you make. Toward the end of that task in August, 2000, I came across a one page article in a newspaper entitled “Changing a Home into a House.” The author of the article was doing the same thing I was, clearing those things out of the family home that helped to make it “home.” In my case, it was removing the things that had made this house my home, not just another house along the main road through the village in which I had grown up. Caroline and I had given some things to neighbours and some furniture and other items to some of my cousins. We had had a massive yard sale and had shipped things we wanted to keep to what was then our home in Kingston. By the end of that summer, we had a house that could be put on the market. And in the way the author of the article had described, it was no longer home. When we came back to my home village that fall, as I was the guest preacher for my home congregation’s 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the house had not sold. Caroline and I went through it again, picking up one small thing we realized we had left behind earlier. The layout of the rooms was the same, and yet the rooms were different; the cupboards were empty, no furniture remained, there were no pictures on the walls.

Of course, what made that house “home” was not just the pictures on the walls, or the familiar dishes, or some of the books from my childhood that had sat in the bookcase in my bedroom until the summer of 2000. What also made that house “home” were memories—memories of one Christmas in particular, of playing the piano that sat in the living room, of cooking in the kitchen with my Dad, of grabbing my ball glove from the table in the back porch where it always sat and heading out the door to the ball field, of lying on the floor in the living room each Saturday evening with my dog Buddy lying by my side, watching Hockey Night in Canada, and the list goes on. Memories, of course, of various things about my parents associated with the house.

This past spring, when I was in the Maritimes for not quite a week, I drove past the house—drove past it twice in fact, the second time stopping the car and getting out to look at changes a subsequent owner had made, but also at what from the outside was still the same.

What makes a place a special place to us? Primarily, it is the activities and events we associate with that place, although certain things also become symbols of what makes it special space, a special place, for those things can be a catalyst for our memories.

Today’s lesson from I Kings 8 tells the story of Solomon dedicating the temple he had built in Jerusalem. It was a magnificent place, as the two previous chapters make clear in their description of its construction. That temple would last for between three and one-half and four centuries before it was destroyed by the Babylonians when they sacked the city of Jerusalem in 587/586 BCE.

The description of the dedication ceremony makes clear what an important place the temple was, at least as Solomon perceived it. And his perception was accurate. Even after its

destruction by the Babylonians, the memory of it continued to occupy a key place in the Jewish religious tradition. It was a very special sacred space.

We know the importance of sacred space for us. While we do not think that God is restricted to being within these walls, church buildings have been important in our religious tradition because they do represent a space, indeed a place, a place where religious symbols help us to experience God as present to us, present in that space. For some of us, it is one thing—perhaps the communion table, or the pulpit, or the piano, or the windows, or the pews, or just the layout of the place itself that makes the space seem sacred. For others of us it is some combination that creates the sacred space that enables us to feel close to God, or, at least, to be a place where we sense God can be present to us, though we would not believe that God is somehow restricted to this place or others like it. Many of us, in fact, may experience God as more present to us in some other place. But in our tradition a church, in whatever design, seems significant in our practice of the faith, even as the Temple was significant in the Jewish tradition until its destruction; indeed, it continued to be significant even after its destruction.

I mentioned that for many of us a church building plays a significant role in the practice of our faith tradition. The existence of such a building is not necessary to the practice of our faith tradition, and many active Christians in our country, not to mention in other parts of the world, carry on a rich life of Christian worship without having a building such as this one in which to gather. But places like this one, with its traditional symbols, seem important to most of us. When I started to teach at Queen's in the early fall of 1991, I had to decide where to go to church, now that I was no longer leading worship in two different congregations every Sunday morning. I began to attend what was then a new congregation, about two years old. The congregation was meeting in a school gymnasium, several rows of chairs set up in a horseshoe, basketball nets

overhead. In this growing suburban area of Kingston, I noted that a number of the people who came for a Sunday or two to check out this new congregation chose not to stay. A few years later the congregation began to rent space in a local Anglican church and moved from the school gym. Once the congregation was in the sanctuary of the Anglican church, a number of the persons who had checked the congregation out but had not stayed when it was meeting in the school gym now returned and stayed. It is a memory that has stuck with me about how some of us, at least, need some of the familiar symbols of a church in order to find a particular space a meaningful one for worship.

The other thing that is important for many of us in terms of a church building is the memories we have associated with it. If you remember my earlier comments about a home and what makes a house a home, it is both physical things and the memories associated with that place. Indeed, it is really a sense of place. We can think of a home, whether it is an apartment, a condominium or a house, as a geographic location. But it is more than that. Especially if we have lived there for a while and have memories associated with the site, that apartment or condominium or house is a place. It is a site that combines familiar items located in certain spots with memories of times and events and people associated with that spot, and those factors come together to make it a place, a home. The same is true for church buildings, especially if we have been part of the congregation for awhile that meets that meets in that space. If we have been part of it for awhile, we have memories associated with the building and the space—a marriage, perhaps, or a Sunday School pageant, of the baptism of one of our children, or the funeral of a spouse, and the list goes on.

Solomon's temple was not the same as a church for it was a central worship site for the whole nation, a place to which every member of society would come from time to time. It was a

place where God's presence was expected to dwell, where one could be in the presence of God and experience that presence. So, that is a difference.

But Solomon's prayer as part of that dedication of the temple reflected a new and growing understanding in ancient Israelite religion. For most of their previous history, the people of Israel had shared the conventional understanding of other peoples of the ancient Mediterranean world that God was tied to a particular place or to particular objects or symbols. For example, at an earlier time God was understood to be present wherever the Ark of the Covenant was located. That earlier era tied God very much to a specific place. That understanding was why, for example, David wanted to move the Ark of the Covenant to his new capital city of Jerusalem. Even if that older understanding was beginning to be challenged in a serious way in David's time, the older understanding was still held by many.

Solomon certainly hoped that God would be present in a special way in this new temple or, at the very least, would be associated with the temple in such a way that it would be the dominant religious site in the country. He prayed to God "that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house the place of which you said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place." But in his prayer, Solomon acknowledged that God is not confined in any way to this temple he had built. "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you," he prayed, "much less this house that I have built."

Now to us there is nothing strange about Solomon acknowledging both his hope that God will be especially present in this temple and his sense that God is not contained there, indeed not contained within "heaven and the highest heaven," to use Solomon's phrase. Yet I think that there is still an insight here for us, too. At times in the Christian tradition, we have emphasized God's great distance from us and our world, the sense of God beyond our world. The technical term for

that understanding is to speak about God as transcendent or about God's transcendence, the sense that God is other, beyond our world, wholly other and different from us and our daily life. At other times in Christian history, the emphasis has been on God as present to us in our world, as a God whose presence we feel close at hand. The technical term that is used for this emphasis or understanding is immanence. We speak about God as immanent.

These two different emphases show up in our hymns. A hymn like "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty," reflects the sense of God as transcendent, as above and beyond our world, rather like Solomon's notion of God as beyond "heaven and the highest heaven." One sees the same thing in the hymn "Praise, My Soul, the God of Heaven." It, too, reflects the sense of God's transcendence, God's otherness. In contrast we have hymns like "Jesus Loves me," or "O Master Let me walk with Thee," or "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine." All three of these hymns emphasize the idea of God's closeness to us, God's immanence, God as that special friend who will come by our side and help to get us through some difficult situation. You see the difference between these two types of hymns? These hymns come from different periods, and the words of the hymns reflect the theological emphasis of the period in which the hymns were written. That last group of three, for example, all emphasize God's immanence. They all come from the last half of the nineteenth century, a time when much theological writing emphasized God's immanence, God's presence in our world, God's nearness to us.

In Christian history, theological writing in any generation has generally tended to emphasize either God's transcendence or God's immanence, depending upon what is happening in the world at a given time. Good theological thinking, like good preaching, should be reflecting on what is happening in the world and what it is that our faith tradition has to say to us in the time in which we find ourselves. But it is easy, or at least it has been easy in Christian history, for

us to overemphasize one or other of those two “poles.” Sometimes we have emphasized so much an understanding of God who is beyond the “highest heaven” that God has seemed remote from our world, remote from us, even uncaring. At other times, we have emphasized God as present to us so much that God becomes almost like our buddy, so concerned about us and our world that we can begin to imagine God caring about us predominantly, or even solely.

Both these ways of understanding how we experience God—whether as transcendent or as immanent—are valid and valuable. The problem comes when we overemphasize one or the other. Solomon, in this dedication prayer, picks up the two things we need to hold together when we think about God—on the one hand a God who cares about each one of us and hears our prayers and, at the same time, a God who is beyond us, not confined to a particular time and space and, perhaps most important, not confined by our desires and understandings. It is a tension we need to hold, the God who is intimately beside us, especially in those moments when we need that caring touch, the assurance that God is with us and cares for us, and the God who stands beyond us, caring not only for us, not only for our world, but for the whole creation, the one who made us but who, in the fullness that is God, is greater even than our imagining.

And it is to that God who made us, to the one through whom we have come to know that God most fully, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God with us now and with us always, that we offer all honour, glory, and praise, this day and forever, Amen.

**Resources:**

Brooks, Kyle. “Commentary on I Kings 8,” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/>; accessed August 20, 2024.

Nelson, Richard D. *First and Second Kings*: Louisville, John Knox Press, 1987.