

SACRED SPACE

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, August 25, 2019
based on Exodus 40:16–34; I Kings 8:12–13, 27–29***

The sermon this morning is the second in a sermon series entitled, “Come into God’s Presence.” In this series we are looking at Biblical worship, and we will find that what the Bible says about worship informs our spiritual life in general—how it is that we can indeed enter and live in the presence of God. {prayer}

If we look at world religion, going back into the most ancient times, one of the great constants that we find is that people create *sanctuaries*—particular spaces that are set aside for worship. Often these spaces become very elaborate; worship sites are typically the most significant structures in ancient societies. People created permanent sanctuaries even before they had permanent homes—the most prominent examples being Gobekli Tepe in Turkey and Stonehenge in England, both of them built during the Stone Age by hunter/gatherer cultures. We don’t know much about the specific rituals that people performed at these most ancient sites. We know, for example, that Stonehenge was oriented toward movements of the sun, so that it aligns precisely with the solstice; but it was much more than a giant sundial, since you could do the same tracking of the sun using far smaller objects! All we know is that it was certainly a religious site, a *sacred space*, which had enormous meaning for people. They went to extraordinary effort, dragging huge stones hundreds of miles to this spot, in order to create it.

The effort that people put into sanctuaries shows the importance of religion for human societies. But why did people feel a need to create special places for worship? Last week we noted that worship at its core is a movement of coming into the presence of God. Human beings since the most ancient times have sensed that there is an Ultimate Reality behind all things, and worship is a response to that Higher Power—a connecting of oneself with God. But God of course is everywhere. Why did people think that they needed to create “sacred spaces,” when the whole world in fact is filled with God? The answer is what we noted last week—that although God is always present with us, we tend to fall asleep to God. We become so absorbed in the things of this world that we often forget God and become unaware of God. We need somehow to come awake to God, to recognize God’s presence, so that we can lift our spirits to God in worship. Sanctuaries are spaces that help us to come awake to God and to respond to God. This is why people very often built sanctuaries to be impressive structures. They are designed to evoke in people a sense of the glory of God, so that the space itself will move people to lift their spirits and focus upon the Divine. And since worship is a movement of glorifying God, our sanctuaries have often been constructed in the most glorious way possible, so that the building itself becomes a kind of tribute to God.

All this can be seen in the most important Biblical stories about sanctuaries—the stories of the ancient tabernacle and temple, parts of which we heard in the Scripture

readings this morning. The tabernacle was a sanctuary built by the people of Israel after they escaped from slavery in Egypt and were journeying through the wilderness. Since they were steadily on the move, the particular feature of the tabernacle was that it was movable. It was made of fabric mounted on poles, so that the whole thing could be taken down and set up again like a giant tent. Along the outside of the tabernacle, there was an outer wall of curtains stretched across poles, which enclosed a large courtyard. This created the main worship area for the people. According to an earlier passage in Exodus, “the curtains were made of fine twisted linen, and blue, purple, and crimson yarns, with cherubim [winged angelic figures] skillfully worked into them.” (Exodus 36:8) In the center of the courtyard was a large structure covered with fine leather on the outside and elaborately woven fabric on the inside. The doors to the structure were colorful curtains, and the fabric walls were sustained by frames of acacia wood, set in silver bases, forming two rooms. In the first room were a gold lampstand, the light of which symbolized the presence of God, a golden incense altar, which symbolized the prayers of the people as well as the presence of God’s Spirit, and a small gold-covered altar for bread placed as a symbolic offering of the people’s harvest to God. The second and more interior room was called the Holy of Holies; it contained the ark of the covenant, a large gold-plated rectangular box which held the stone tablets of the ten commandments. In the outer courtyard in the midst of the gathered people, there stood a large bronze altar for burnt offerings, and a large laver or basin of water used for ritual cleansings. The various furnishings—the ark of the covenant, the incense table, the bread table, the altar, the water basin, and the lampstand—were all made so that they could be easily moved; most of them were fitted with rings and poles for carrying. Obviously, people went to enormous effort to make all this, and they used the most beautiful materials that they had. The result was a worship space that was visually inspiring.

The tabernacle is the Biblical foundation of our church worship spaces today. In the passage we heard from Exodus 40, there is a continuing refrain, whereby each element of the tabernacle is described along with the phrase, “as the Lord had commanded Moses.” *[Moses put the lampstand opposite the table, as the Lord had commanded Moses. Exodus 40:24]* The message here is that Moses did not simply dream up the design of the tabernacle, as though he said to himself, “You know, it would be nice to have a lampstand in this place, so let’s make one of those.” He was inspired rather by the Spirit of God to create these various elements, because each aspect of the tabernacle functioned in a particular way to help the people to worship, to come into the presence of God. So also today, when we create a worship space, we seek to be guided by God’s instruction, and we take our fundamental cues from the Biblical tabernacle. Our worship spaces have the same basic concept and contain the same basic elements.

Like the tabernacle, there is first of all a particular area, enclosed by walls, that is designated for worship. Unlike the tabernacle, where the main assembly area for the people was open-air, we have a roof over everything, since it is Ohio. Our one exception to that is

our newest worship space under development, the Chapel in the Woods, in our church woods to the north of the bus garage. But it also is a defined area—a clearing in the woods, framed in along the sides by recently planted spruce trees. In the tabernacle, there was a focal point—a covered structure, where the priests led the main activities of worship. Our Chapel in the Woods has exactly that kind of covered structure as the focal point. In our other worship spaces, where the whole space is covered by a roof, there is always an area that is the focal point where the activities of worship are led. In the tabernacle, that central area had a lampstand [*Moses set up the lamps before the Lord Exodus 40:25*], and we also have lampstands or candles up front, symbolizing the light of God. The lampstand was made of gold, and our candlestands likewise are made of . . . well, brass; but it conveys the idea! The tabernacle had a table for bread [*Moses set up the table with bread on it Exodus 40:22–23*], and we also have a table in our worship spaces where we put the bread of Communion. The tabernacle had an altar of incense [*Moses set up the golden altar and offered fragrant incense on it Exodus 40:26–27*], and that is the one item that most Protestants have pretty much dropped, but it is still used of course by Catholic and Orthodox and Episcopalian churches. Old Testament worship was designed to be multisensory, engaging all the senses. The one time we really engage the olfactory sense is on Easter Sunday, when you can definitely notice that we have loaded up the sanctuary with lilies! At the very center of the tabernacle was the ark of the covenant [*Moses took the covenant (the tablets of the ten commandments) and put it into the ark, and brought the ark into the tabernacle Exodus 40:20*], which contained the tablets of the ten commandments. It disappeared 2500 years ago during the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, and no one knows what became of it; but in synagogues today, it is represented by having a large Torah, a copy of the first five books of the Bible, in a special place in the front of the sanctuary; and we also in our main sanctuary have an open Bible on the altar, or in all of our services we display the words of the Bible on the screens. In front of all those items in the tabernacle there was a basin containing water for ritual cleansing [*Moses set up the basin and put water in it for washing Exodus 40:30*], and that carries forward into the present day in the bowl of water for baptism, which we bring out as needed, while our sanctuary also has a permanent baptismal font in the front of the chancel. Finally, clearly visible before everyone, there was a large altar for sacrifices [*Moses set up the altar of burnt offering Exodus 40:29*] We also have an altar at the center of our worship spaces which serves the same function, except that we no longer offer burnt offerings of sheep and goats and bulls—because Christ has made the once and for all sacrifice for us. This is why, in each of our worship spaces, you will see, either on or above the altar, a cross—representing the eternal sacrifice made on our behalf—and we also place the elements of Communion on the altar, again symbolizing how Christ has offered himself for us, to reconcile us with God.

From all this it is clear that a Biblically inspired worship space is not simply a room where people happen to hold a worship service. The tabernacle was designed to be an inspiring space. It was beautiful and colorful—to reflect something of the glory and the

wonder of God. In our sanctuary and chapel we capture something of that radiant color through the stained glass windows; and in all of our worship spaces we now use projection screens as a 21st century medium for portraying colorful and illustrative imagery in worship. The tabernacle was full of rich symbolism—in the lampstand and the water and the imagery of sacrifice—and we also use that kind of symbolism in all of our worship spaces today—the central symbol being the cross. Even in our outdoor chapel, there is a cross and flame—the flame symbolizing the Holy Spirit, and the cross and flame combination being the symbol of our United Methodist Church. It is in the floor of the central structure; and we have plans for large cross as a main focal point. So every worship space engages people visually.

In one of the hymns of this morning, the refrain is “At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light, and the burden of my heart rolled away.” The image is of someone before the cross, reflecting about the sacrifice that Christ has made for us, and “seeing the light”—realizing that in Christ our sins are forgiven, and feeling the burden of guilt and regret removed. A biblically inspired worship space is designed to help people make exactly this movement. In the tabernacle, people would see the sacrifices made on the altar, and they would see the smoke of the sacrifice rising toward heaven, and it would help them to lift their spirit to God in repentance and to feel forgiven. Today when we come into a worship space and we see the cross and the other imagery of worship, it can inspire us to recognize that in Christ the sacrifice is made and forgiveness is ours to receive, and so we can be moved to lift our hearts to the Lord in faith.

There are many other elements, of course, that can impact us in worship—the music that is sung, the words spoken, the various actions done, and the specific meaning of various symbols and sacraments—and we will pursue all that in coming weeks. But it is worth noting the function of the worship space itself. A sanctuary is designed to draw us into a space that is different from the rest of the world, so that the space itself helps us to wake up from our spiritual slumber and to come afresh into the presence of God. Even when we are using a space for worship that is functional and multipurpose, like our church gymnasium, we make the space look different on Sunday mornings from how it looks when we have basketball in there, so that for our contemporary service there is a worshipful feel to the space, and it has the same kind of symbolism that we have in the sanctuary or chapel.

In recent decades in America, there was an interesting trend among some churches that were trying to make worship inviting for people who were unchurched and unfamiliar with worship. The idea was that the typical sanctuary, especially one with stained glass windows and pews and an altar and candles, might seem strange and off-putting to unchurched people; and so worship centers were created that looked just like auditoriums or theaters. Often there was no Christian symbolism at all, not even a cross. There was a stage and a screen, and seating just like you would have in a theater, so that any unchurched person who came would feel right at home. Recently, of course, movie theaters have been transitioning to the big cushy lounge type chairs that recline way back, with big cup holders,

which makes me wonder if some churches will start moving to that! But surely there is something missing in all this. It is true that sanctuaries have always reflected the architectural style of the host culture. But in a Biblically inspired worship space, people should not feel right at home or too comfortable. There should seem to be something different or even strange about the place; because the space itself should say to us, “It is time for you to step aside for a moment from your usual routine, out of your regular comfort zone, because there is another reality, a greater reality, that is beckoning. This space is not your house or your local theater; for the moment, it is God’s house that is summoning each one of us to worship.”

The story of the tabernacle concludes with the statement that “the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.” (Exodus 40:34) Some people understand this to mean that in the days of the tabernacle, there was actually a visible radiance of God that shone around the place. Others understand this in more spiritual terms. But either way, the message is that God was truly present for people in the tabernacle. We can experience God’s presence is a profound way as we enter into “God’s house” for worship.

Many years ago, when I was serving in another church, a man started coming to church who had not been in a church for many years. He told me that he had believed in God, but he never saw the need for coming to church. He told himself, “Why do I need to go to church? I can pray to God in a closet.” Then one day he realized, he never did pray to God in a closet. In fact, he never thought about God in the closet at all, and for the most part his spirituality was simply an abstract belief in a distant Divinity. He started coming to church, to meet God firsthand, and to develop an alive and dynamic faith.

Eventually, the people of Israel transitioned out of the days of the tabernacle when King Solomon built a permanent temple in Jerusalem; but the temple was even more glorious, and it based directly upon the tabernacle design. They thought of it as God’s house—as Solomon said, “I have built for You, O Lord, an exalted house, a place for You to dwell forever” (I Kings 8:13)—while at the same time Solomon acknowledged, “But even the highest heaven cannot contain You, Lord, much less this house that I have built!” (I Kings 8:27). God’s presence surely fills the universe. But we go to someone’s house to personally connect with that individual and to share in fellowship together. So we enter Gods’ house to connect with God, to come into God’s presence.