

“Home in this Sacred Space”
Psalm 139
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 10, 2023
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

Several Septembers ago, in Moab, Utah, I woke long before the sunrise and prepared for a hike in Arches National Park. It was about 4am when my friends and I arrived in the parking lot to begin the hike to Delicate Arch, that iconic symbol of Arches that can be seen on the Utah license plate. For about an hour, we hiked in the dark, guided by the stars above and headlamps and the low voices of fellow hikers ahead of us. When we arrived at the arch, we sat on the edge of the huge basin below it and watched the sun peek over our shoulders, slowly changing the colors of the sandstone from deep blue to purple to red to orange. My friends and I sat, quiet, honoring the space that seemed to us to almost vibrate with sacredness. I remember being almost moved to tears as I sat there, my palms to the earth, in awe of all the generations who had passed through here before me, walking tenderly on this ground and honoring the glory of Creation.

Sacred space can be difficult to define. In a way, it denotes places that have been set aside to be cared for and treated specially, where blessings are uttered, and tradition is honored. Sacred space can also be anywhere that fosters a feeling of transcendence and connection to something greater than ourselves.

What comes to mind when you think of sacred space? Call out some thoughts.

When people talk about sacred space, conversation seems to go in one of two directions. We may think of natural wonders of the world, stunning sights mostly preserved from human domination...On the naturally occurring side of sacred space, often it's mountains like Olympus, Kilimanjaro, Fuki, Sinai, Etna, Coatepec or Rainier, that we think of when we imagine ancient peoples knowing deep in their bones that the earth itself houses God. Every time I see Mount Rainier rising above the Seattle skyline, it makes so much sense that indigenous peoples since time immemorial looked at that volcano and knew there was something special, mysterious, powerful about it.

The other aspect of sacred space we often think of are human-made structures like the Parthenon, Notre Dame, Mecca, the Sagrada Familia and the Dome of the Rock. The spaces that spring to mind are more-often-than-not great feats of engineering and craftsmanship, protected as UNESCO World Heritage sites, their upkeep and restoration a matter of global concern. These spaces were created by communities setting aside a place for ritual, worship, sacrifice, pilgrimage.

But then...there's also the everyday sacredness of the spaces in which we live. Psalm 139 reminds us that God is with us everywhere, that there is no place we can go where God is far from us. To the ends of the earth, the far reaches of the sea, the wings of the dawn and the enveloping star-flecked darkness: though we may go there, the Holy also goes with us. So that

means that our kitchen tables, back gardens, hospital rooms, church sanctuaries...all of these places are sacred, too.

And we saw this during the at-home times of the COVID-19 pandemic, didn't we? Though we were not able to worship together in this warm, beautiful enclosure with gorgeous stained glass around and the music of organ and choir ringing in our ears, we still were able to worship: at kitchen tables, in gardens, in hospitals, even in our cars, in the artificial light of our computers and phones and television screens... the mundane became the sacred as we realized that our worship in those places was no less real or powerful than our worship in this sanctuary. God was no less real or present with us outside of this building.

Last night, about 70 people gathered in the Fellowship Hall to celebrate the one-year anniversary of the Small Groups Ministry. We had a fabulous time, with thanks to Cherry, Vanessa and Jacob...and we also celebrated that one of the achievements of this program over the past year was to help this congregation experience church not just on Sundays from 11-noon, but all throughout the week. The love and connection of this fellowship has been extended through Zoom screens and gatherings of the Tuesday prayer group, the Gay Men's group, the Friendship Circle, the Play-Reading Group, and the BIPOC group, and more. Small Groups Ministry has encouraged us, in a way, to recognize the sacred space in the time we make for each other as well as the places we physically, or virtually, share.

What if all the world was sacred space? What if wherever we went, it felt right for us to emulate Moses and remove the shoes from our feet because we were on holy ground? What if all of our lives were worship, and a church is simply a place where we choose to be in communal pursuit of the Holy? A space doesn't need to be the most expensive, fanciest, well-designed physical space for it to be a place that fosters connection between you and the Great Something Else, or the Holy. Scholar Joseph Campbell said, "your sacred space is where you can find yourself again and again." Where might that be for you? Is it in a specific geographic location, or connected to a physical item? Perhaps it is denoted by a tender memory or a gathering of people. For me, the forest where I spread my grandparents' ashes and the red couch in the home I shared with my seminary friends and the Fellowship Hall downstairs are just as important to me as the church where I was baptized and as this worship space where I am honored to minister.

What is sacred space for you may, and probably does, look different from what is sacred to someone else. You may have multiple places that draw you close to what connects you with Love and with Life. English novelist Elizabeth Gaskell phrased it this way: "... it seemed to me that where others had prayed before to their God, in their joy or in their agony, was of itself a sacred place."

And so whether you are aware of the presence of the Holy most in the light of these stained glass windows or standing over your kitchen sink or driving along an interstate, wherever you have cried out in celebration or in mourning or in anger to the Love Beyond All Loves, that place is set apart ...you have been in sacred space.

In a poem entitled "How to Be a Poet," with the subtitle "to remind myself," Kentucky farmer and poet Wendell Berry writes, "there are no un-sacred places; there are only sacred places and

desecrated places.” That phrase has stuck with me since I read it many years ago—it makes sense! The creation story in Genesis 1 says that God saw all the creation and declared it “good” --and so how could the inherent value of any animate or inanimate being in this cosmos be anything less than sacred? When we recognize that as the beginning, we also have to recognize what human greed, domination, wastefulness and destruction have done to desecrate the world in which we live.

Beloved church, as one of our core congregation values is care of Creation, we recognize that all of Creation is alive with the vibrance of the Holy...all of Creation is sacred, from the Kentucky caverns to the Arctic Circle to the Amazon River to the small farms in China to Mediterranean olive groves to the Great Barrier Reef. But during difficult times in our lives, it can be hard to remember that. With the psalmist, sometimes our worry or anxiety prompt us to ask, “where can we go from God’s Spirit?” Then the psalmist reminds us: there is no place where we can go that will prove to our basest fears in our lowest moments that we are alone, unlovable, and completely lost—the Holy is perpetually holding us and loving us, from beginning to end and all in between. All places and all times are suffused with divine love...and that means, even this place, and this time, and this people, is surrounded and infused with the Holy.

I want to be careful not to suggest that nowhere is special because everywhere is...that is too simplistic. Rather, let us live our lives with intention, let us increase our observation of our lives and our engagement with the world around us. Let us be aware of where we step, where we lay our heads, where we spend our money, where we gather with loved ones... *and* where we witness injustice, encounter heartbreak, and are dominated by violence, oppression and war. That awareness can lead us into further communion with the Holy as we pursue justice, peace and belonging for all people.

As I was preparing this sermon and Googling “sacred space” trying to find some quote that had lodged itself in my brain, I came across this quote and haven’t been able to shake it.

“If sacred places are spared the ravages of war... then make all places sacred. And if the holy people are to be kept harmless from war... then make all people holy.”¹

Wow. This quote comes from a Marvel comic about the Silver Surfer in a series called Requiem.

Isn’t that the attitude we should adopt? Understanding all places as sacred so that the desecration of war spares not only the places of stunning beauty and cultural importance but also the normal, everyday, unimpressive places where regular people live their lives? And shouldn’t we also understand all people as holy, so that some privileged few are not exempt from violence while others are targeted, but that violence itself would be no more, in recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of all humanity?

Dear friends, wherever you are, that is sacred space. Where you sleep and wake up and eat and dream and love and work and rejoice... that is sacred space. The microscopic gaps between your cells are sacred. The lightyears that separate cosmic landmarks are sacred. This sanctuary is

¹ J. Michael Straczynski, *from the Marvel comic about the Silver Surfer, Requiem*

sacred. The sidewalk outside that holds copper leaves with people's names on them is sacred. The columbarium where we lay to rest our loved ones is sacred. Puget Sound is sacred, the nightclub is sacred, the bus is sacred, the highway underpass is sacred... in the same way that Mount Rainier and Notre Dame are sacred because there is Something of God to be found there. Wherever the Holy draws your attention, wherever you are invited into intentional living, wherever you find yourself vibrating in time with all Life...these places are sacred. These places call us home.

And together, in this community, wherever we gather has the potential to be sacred. This sanctuary, virtual coffee hour, the Peacemaker's room, Green Lake Park, a movie theater, a table set with food for friends... in our life together, we make a habit of recognizing the abundance of God wherever we are, just as the psalmist said. And so, wherever we are, solitary contemplation or in small groups sharing our hearts or hundreds raising our voices in song and prayer, we are on holy ground and our being is suffused with the glory of the One we call Love.

So, welcome home, to this sacred place. To your body. To this body of Christ. To the walls of your cells and the walls of this building. Welcome home, for all the world is your home: the world that has passed away, the world that is yet to come, the world that is calling out now for us to make it possible for all people to know their identity is Beloved. Welcome home.