

August 23, 2009 12th Sunday after Pentecost *A Holy Place*
 1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 27-30, 41-43; Ps. 84

A holy place. That's what the people of God set aside for special purposes as Solomon presided over the dedication of the temple. A holy place. That's what the psalmist celebrates as he names his desire to always be close to the house of the Lord. A holy place. That's what we need in our lives, a place, a holy place where we can learn the truth, where we can get our bearings, where we can stay true to ourselves no matter where we find ourselves wandering around in the world.

There is power in the place

Senior citizens so difficult to leave their home

Special place in life, grandma's house; as football season approaches it might be Blacksburg, C'ville, Ashland, other; there passes through me sometimes the desire to visit just once 135 W Eagle St in Painesville, Ohio where I lived as a child...the house is still there..it would be so easy to write a letter, enclose my card, just to visit that place again, but haven't done it

What the Scripture talks about today is a holy place. The word "holy" is one of those words we use so often in the church that it tends to lose the depth of its meaning. "Holy" means, of course, "sacred, consecrated, set apart for divine purpose." But there is even more to it than that. "Holy" also means "whole, full, fulfilled." So when we speak of a holy place this morning we are indeed speaking of a place set aside by God for special purposes, namely a place of God's special presence in the world where humanity has unique access to the divine. But a holy place is also where you find wholeness and fullness and fulfillment of life. It is a place where life all comes together, where it all makes sense, where you find the meaning to existence, and identify your special purpose. That's what we need in our lives, isn't it? A place where we can learn the truth, get our bearings straight, and stay true to ourselves?

That is the lure of our places of the past. They help locate our lives; help us find some kind of grounding in where we are right now because of where we have been. I believe our problem today is not that we don't believe we all need a holy place. No, that's not the problem. Whether we admit it or not that is exactly what we spend our lives doing—trying to make life fit all together, trying to make sense of the mess we so often make of life, trying to find that something that is greater than ourselves—in other words, trying to find that holy place. Have you found that place?

Sometimes we like to go back because we find ourselves still searching for a place of meaning in our lives. You see, I believe we spend our lives searching for a place, a holy place. And we look everywhere for it. We search for it because we need it, we need to find it else we just wander around life aimlessly with no clear sense of direction, never really getting anywhere while we frantically rush around trying to get there. If that describes your life as we anticipate the end of the summer and the beginning of the fall with its promise (or threat) of all that rushing around all over again then you know what I'm talking about.

We search but we don't find it. The psalmist describes us pretty well:

...O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints...!

Psalm 84:1b-2a

Longing and fainting. That describes us pretty well most of the time, doesn't it? We long, we faint for life to make sense, to know the truth, to just get our bearings so we can somehow make it from one place to the next with confidence and with trust. Yes, the psalmist describes us pretty well.

But here the psalmist is speaking for himself. And you know how his plea ends! He cries

O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD!

Psalm 84:1b-2a

The “courts of the LORD—“

This song is the song of Zion of those who are on a pilgrimage; a pilgrimage to the city of Jerusalem to worship in the temple of the Lord. On their way they gather strength. As they travel their confidence grows. The closer they get the more they are blessed. Why does their journey bring them strength, confidence, and blessing? Because they are on their way to see God! or rather, they know they travel to a place where God will see them. But, more precisely, because they have seen God and God has seen them they have been transformed and they make their way to the place of their transformation—the very presence of God.

The Psalmist is clear. He says folks who find that holy place in the “courts of the Lord” are happy. They long to be there all the time; they draw strength, courage, and hope in God’s house. The Psalmist is bold to say:

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness. Psalm 84:10b

Now the Psalmist speaks rather dramatically here but another translation makes it a bit more clear:

I would rather lie on the threshold at the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.

H.J. Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary* trans. H.C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988) p. 166 cited by J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) V. IV, p. 1014.

It’s enough just to be in the vicinity of God, just to be near the place to experience the strength, confidence, and blessing. It’s so much better just to stand ready to go into the place of service to God than to live in the lap of your own self-serving world. To live in today’s world you’ve got to have a holy place to ever get your bearings straight.

A clergy friend of mind sent me picture through email one day; perhaps you saw it. It is a picture taken by an American soldier serving in Iraq. The soldiers have made a large planter box. Planted in that box is green grass. Obviously this plot of grass has been well tended to: carefully watered and fertilized. If you look closely enough in the picture of the soldier kneeling beside that planter box you will notice that he has a pair of scissors in his hands, cutting the blades of the grass to maintain that plot’s

pristine landscape. That must be the army-issued lawnmower for Iraq deployment! It turns out this planter box is a very special place. A soldier asked his wife to ship him grass seed and top soil from home. And so they prepared the planter box, planted the seeds, watered and cared for that plot in the severe desert heat until it grew to a thickness and color that defies a golf course fairway. You see, every day before their unit goes out on a mission, every one of them walks through that plot of ground, taking with them all the strength, confidence, and blessing that family, friends, and country give them. It doesn't take much; they just have to walk through that small plot of grass. It's enough just to walk on home ground. For them, that is a holy place. I don't know for sure, but don't you bet from time to time those soldiers take off their shoes and just stand barefooted in that little bit of grass and earth?

A holy place. The psalmist says it's enough just to stand at the door ready to go in to receive the strength, confidence, and blessing of the people of God. That's why folks stand before us and join the church from time to time. That's why parents bring their little children to the very threshold of God's love at the font of baptism. It's enough just to hear the Word read, or the Gospel proclaimed. It's enough just to take a piece of bread and drink from the cup. It's enough just to be with your friends and learn of God's Word. It's enough just to sit around a table of fellowship.

We all need a holy place. For King Solomon, for the psalmist, that place is the house of the LORD. For you, for me, that place is the church. You don't have to live here, you just have to stand ready, ready to go in, ready to receive the love of God in all its fullness and joy that God is so anxious to give.

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