

## **“The (Relative) Significance of Sacred Space”**

**2 Samuel 7:1–14a**

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We all have some space that is sacred for us, physical space, like this sanctuary. I professed Christian faith in the sanctuary at Broadway Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. I was baptized there, Dana and I were married there, less than a year later my mother’s funeral service was held there. That room, the sanctuary, is sacred to me because I have laughed and cried there, sensed God’s presence and heard God’s voice there. It is really the experiences I have had and the memories I have of them, as opposed to just the building itself, that are sacred, but because they took place in the building, it has become sacred too.

Many of us have this very same perspective about this sanctuary. So many of the sacred events of our lives — baby dedications, baptisms, weddings, funerals, Hanging of the Greens Services — have taken place in this space that it has become sacred for us. And this perspective has only become intensified during the pandemic. In the time when we were not able to meet together — and, of course, some of us are still not able to quite yet — we came to realize just how important this place is. It’s just a building, but it’s not just a building. It’s the place where we meet each other and together meet God. We missed this place as much as any other during the time of isolation. It is sacred space for us.

And yet, there is a footnote to this reality. We have also found during the pandemic that we can stay connected even when we are not able to gather here. The church, the body of Christ, is a community of people united by our common connection to Christ, and in this time, we have learned that we can maintain this connection without being together in any specific physical space. Part of how we have done this is through modern technology — telephone, mail, email, Zoom, Webex, Facetime, Facebook, Twitter etc. And our desire to remain connected has been a key factor as well. But mostly how we have remained connected is by love, the love of God working in and through us.

I learned this week about a children's book I have not read titled *The Invisible String*. A mother comforts her two children when they run to be near her at night during a storm that has frightened them. In an effort to calm them, she tells them there is an invisible string of love that connects them, even when they are apart. It is a beautiful and assuring image which Lutheran minister Yvette Schock applies to our relationship to and through God. As a friend of hers notes, God often holds us like a mother soothing a restless child. "God's love is the thread that holds us together with our loved ones, even when we are apart (*The Christian Century*, June 30, 2021, p. 19)."

God's love is the thread that holds us together. As the author of Ephesians puts it — God builds one household for all people which grows into a holy temple in Christ — but he is talking about a spiritual household bound together by love, not a physical household. The primary structure of the church is spiritual, relational, not physical. This does not mean physical space is meaningless. It simply means that as significant as space can be, there is something more significant, something that takes priority, something that comes first.

King David stumbles upon this reality in today's reading from 2 Samuel. He has had his challenges as a king and a husband. He has lamented the deaths of friends and mentors, alienated a wife, and met military resistance. But he has had successes too. He has become king of Israel and Judah, he has brought the ark to Jerusalem, and he lives in a fine home, made of cedar, quite a refinement in this time.

It occurs to him that he is living better than God, as God's presence is viewed to be located in the ark which is kept in a tent. Even though the text does not record him making a specific proposal, the prophet Nathan understands that David wants to build God a house, and Nathan approves. "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you," he says, but as it turns out, the Lord is not, at least on this project.

God speaks to Nathan in the night and tells him to confront David, saying, "Who are you to build me a house?" It is not the last time Nathan will be told to confront his king. God hasn't needed a house before. God hasn't asked David to build one. God will build a great

nation through David, God is still with him, but God vetoes this building plan. No divine permit will be granted.

Part of the problem is that David has gotten ahead of God here which is never a good idea. Rather than seeking God's counsel and direction, David has just forged ahead with his own ideas, though to be fair, his spiritual counselor thinks he is doing the right thing. Neither prophet nor king gets it right at first.

Another part of the problem is with the assumption that God wants what David wants. As one scholar has put it, it is the reversal of *Imago Dei*. David is remaking God in his own image.

But the biggest problem with David's thinking is that God does not need a house. People need a place to live and God will provide a place for God's people, but the God of all creation dwells everywhere. A house dedicated to God might be a nice thing one day. Solomon will build a temple. But for now, God doesn't need a house.

The message for us is not that space doesn't matter or that buildings are a waste of resources. Great things happen in buildings and thus some space becomes sacred. The message is about perspective and priorities. There are things that are more important than buildings, like our relationships with each other, our love for God, and our calling to serve God by meeting human needs in the world. And while many sacred things can happen within buildings, the first task is to discern together who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do so that we can know what kind of buildings we need.

This is the charge of the Dream Team — to engage the church in a discernment process around calling so as to inform our decision about what to do with our aging educational building. The Facilities Assessment Committee continues to work on the building side of this process, looking at all the options, but before we make a decision, we need greater clarity about what we feel called to do, so that we don't, like David, get ahead of God. There will be many opportunities this fall to participate in the process of discernment.

For the sacredness of any space is always related to its use, dependent upon its purpose and ability to accomplish it. Sometimes it is

easy to forget this and end up wanting to hold on to space that no longer serves the purpose for which it was created.

I recall the dear member of another church I served nearly forty years ago. When a new educational building was being planned, space was included for a new, up-to-date media center which would replace the old library. There would be space for many more books, but also slides and films, and space for children and adults to read and study.

The old space was tiny and outdated, but the church librarian of many years was attached to it. She had many memories tied to that space and knew how to work in it. So, she resisted the new endeavor, she spoke and voted against, but it was built anyway, it served the church's needs so much better, everyone else agreed. At the first church conference after the vote, the librarian presented a poem she had written about the old library. It was a little sad, I must confess, but we all cared about her, and there are times when we all become overly attached to some space, long past the time it has served its purposes well.

No building lasts forever. I have a brick in my office from a sanctuary that burned down in the 1970s. It belonged to a church I served in Danville, Virginia, after that time; the same church Nancy Jo Fleming's father served before that time. It provides a reminder of the transient nature of all things. The church had a new sanctuary when I was there, a marvelous worship space.

There is also no guarantee for how buildings will be used over time. When we visited Ali in Ann Arbor, we ate dinner one evening at the Salt Springs Brewery in nearby Saline. They have wonderful food and beverages and the space is magnificent. It is a decommissioned Methodist church — that is, it used to be a sanctuary and is now a microbrewery and restaurant. They have kept the stained-glass windows and added a painting on the ceiling, an echo of the Sistine Chapel, with the hand of God giving life to hops... It is a story like many around our nation, one that provides a sober reminder that just because a church is built for one purpose doesn't mean it will always serve that purpose.

So, the significance of any space is related to its use, dependent upon its purpose, but this having been said, some space is sacred. While

David does not build God a house, Solomon does build a temple, once the people are settled in homes. Perhaps this is the reason why God doesn't want a house of worship yet. Only David is settled. God identifies with all of God's people, not just the king.

But a temple is built, worship takes place in it, and though the people always fall short of their calling, just like us, they meet God there, draw closer to each other there, and become better people because of their time in that space. It becomes sacred for them.

In fact, it still is. The First Temple is destroyed by the Babylonians in 586/7 BCE. The Second Temple, built after the exile, is mostly destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE after the Jewish rebellion, but a section of a retaining wall, called the Western Wall, built in the second century BCE, stands to this day. It is a holy site for Jews and Muslims, and many Christians as well.

Like some of you, I have prayed at that wall, and there is just something about praying at a site where God's people have gathered for 3,000 years that gets your attention — even if someone tries to get money out of you immediately afterward, and even though you grieve for the ongoing conflicts that plague that land. There is just something sacred about space where so many people for so long have poured out their hearts in joy and sorrow, and then found comfort and peace.

That's why we care so much about this space that has meant so much to us. That's why we are not even thinking about changing this sanctuary. And that's why we are considering so carefully any decisions about what to do with our educational building and any other space we might have in the future. We're not just adding a bedroom to a house or redoing a kitchen. We are contemplating the role physical space will play in connecting people to God and each other, imagining space where joys and sorrows can be shared, dreaming of space where the gospel will be shared and the beloved community will be built.

We are grateful for the people who have come before us and first listened to God and then shaped space that has become sacred, and we pray that we might prove worthy of their gifts to us, be faithful stewards not just of these buildings but of a future that has been entrusted to us.