

SANCTUARY IN THE SANCTUARY

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

March 19, 2006

Scripture: Psalm 122, John 2:13-22

A few weeks ago I preached a sermon entitled, “No Sanctuary in the Sanctuary.”¹ The text for the day described a man with an unclean spirit who came to the synagogue at Capernaum and disrupted the service which led to his dramatic healing by Jesus. I said that if you come to the sanctuary for solace and peace you had best be advised that sometimes the world barges in and disrupts the quiet atmosphere where every head is bowed and every eye is closed before the throne of God.

New Yorkers are never hesitant to tell you what they’re thinking! In other churches I have served in other parts of the country people just say “thank you” at the door for the sermon, but here, folks give you their immediate review. And I got some reaction to that sermon, needless to say.

The comment I took most seriously was the question, “But isn’t there peace in the sanctuary as well? Isn’t there a place of comfort and healing and rest and inspiration along with the challenge and confrontation?”

Three weeks into Lent, along comes another passage of disruption in the sanctuary, or at least in the vestibule. The story is one of Jesus cleansing the temple, overturning the tables of the money changers, scattering coins on the floor, chasing out the cattle and sheep which were there for sacrifice. John tells us that Jesus had a whip in his hand, no doubt commandeered from one of the cattle drivers, a stark image of Jesus that doesn’t come easily to our mind or eye.

It is an impression of him that is hard to put in the same folder with the Jesus who gathers the children around him and says that to such belongs the kingdom of heaven; or the Jesus who on the night of his last Passover supper wrapped a towel around his waist and washed his disciples’ feet.

The picture of Jesus, whip in hand, coins rolling on the floor, his chest heaving from throwing over the tables makes you wonder whether this is a passage appropriate to make the point that there is peace and healing in the sanctuary! It would likely not be on this Sabbath that the congregation should sing the old hymn, “There’s a sweet, sweet spirit in this place!”

John alone among the gospel writers places the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. The other three gospel writers describe it as one of the culminating acts of Jesus’ public witness, placing it at the beginning of Holy Week, and representing one of the events that set the wheels in motion that led to the crucifixion.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are probably right about the timing, but John has recast the story at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry to score an early point in favor of the work that Jesus would accomplish. He would cleanse the temple, and in so doing re-establish the temple as a house of prayer, not a marketplace. He would make the point that his body had become the new temple of God, the same body that would suffer and die and be raised on the third day.

Jesus' vision of the earthly temple was that it should be a place where God dwells unmarred by the crass intrusions of the world including livestock sales and currency exchanges. He was shocked by what he found, so if it took some overturned tables and some cattle rushing onto the Temple Mount to accomplish that peace, so be it. His disappointment was that great.

One day when we were in Israel last month we visited a remarkable Jewish orphanage, Yemin Orde, located in the Carmel Mountains north of Jerusalem. In this residential village for children 500 Jewish kids from twenty countries around the world, kids whom no one wants, many of whom have troubled backgrounds, have come together for a unique school and living experience. Many of the children and teenagers are Russians and, interestingly, many are Ethiopian. Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to Israel in 1984 and 1991 to help them escape persecution in their homeland.

The orphaned Ethiopian kids who came to Israel had heard about Jerusalem all their lives. The prayers of their faith had spoken of Jerusalem, the psalms they knew by heart celebrated going up to Jerusalem, the Passover that they kept each year ended with the refrain, "Next year in Jerusalem." So from an early age, these African Jewish children had imagined Jerusalem to be like some heavenly city with streets of gold, and people who are angelic.

Imagine their disappointment when they came to the earthly Jerusalem for the first time, where they discovered that the city is anything but a city of gold. It is a modern urban city with all of the problems and challenges and crime and danger and harshness and materialism of any other city. And they were disillusioned by the reality of it.

I can't help but think that Jesus, coming to the temple in Jerusalem and seeing the inner courtyard there at the Passover with the cattle and sheep and doves and money changing tables might not have been similarly shocked by the disparity between what he had hoped to find and what he saw. He had been there many times with his parents while growing up, according to Luke, but childhood impressions and adult realities are often widely disparate.

So when Jesus saw what was going on in the temple his rage got the better of him and he grabbed a whip of cords and chased out the commercial interests for the sake of restoring in the temple a house of prayer, a house more rightly fit for God.

If Jesus thought the temple should be a place of communion, a house of prayer, a meeting place of the soul and spirit uniting heaven and earth, a sanctuary where nothing should interfere with encountering God, why shouldn't we expect the same?

Of course, we cannot leave the world completely behind us nor should we use the sanctuary or our faith as a place to escape reality, to avoid taking responsibility for our lives, to revert to a kind of spiritual infantile dependency. Nor is our faith meant to be encapsulated and separated from the rest of our living, as if religion were some privatistic devotional exercise removed from the rest of life. There is too much of that going on already, the isolating of faith, as if Monday had not been preceded by Sunday.

But if we cannot find in our faith and in our worship some sense of peace, some hope for living, some inspiration for the living of our days, then where can we find it? I

have always loved Henri Nouwen's insight that "A city without carefully protected empty spaces where one can sense the silence from which all words grow, and rest in the stillness from which all actions flow, such a city is in danger of losing its soul."²

Here in this place, we should be able to pray and hear God's word proclaimed, and confess our need for God's help, and receive the inspiration that sustains us – we should find here nurturing and restoration so that we can live our lives more fully beyond these walls, centered in the one who is our peace and our security. How did Jesus put it? "I am come that you might have life and that you might have it abundantly."

The psalmist of the 122nd Psalm sings, "I was glad when they said to me, let us go into the house of the Lord. Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem." It is a song that was likely sung as an antiphonal chant while people climbed the steps of the temple preparing to enter its sanctuary. They were filled with anticipation and joy, thinking of the goodness of being in holy space so close to God. "I was glad when they said to me, let us go into the house of the Lord."

Well, this may not be exactly the description you might make of your arrival this morning with your thirteen year old in tow, whose ears are plugged with an iPod and whose thoughts are full of other things than joy at climbing the steps of the sanctuary. Yet, for many of us, this place, these walls, evoke a peacefulness, an inspiration, a grace that keeps us going from day to day and week to week. And so it is for people who find in a particular congregation and sanctuary, holy space. The sanctuary of the church is one of the few places in our harried and hurried week where we may indeed feel centered and at peace, where the possibility of hearing from God, or God hearing from us seems more likely than in other settings and times.

There is something about a house of worship, a place of prayer that hallows its own space within our lives and connects us to something holy and good.

Here the grace of God is made manifest to us as we discover the presence of God in the world in a way that is mediated in a particular time and place.

You may remember that story of Jacob after he had stolen his brother Esau's birthright, the blessing due Esau, but which Jacob stole from his father by dressing in hairy gloves so that he might trick Isaac into thinking that he was his older brother, Esau.

After Jacob had stolen that birthright, he went on the lam, running away from home, where his name was now mud. And while he was running away, in hiding, Jacob lay down to rest, with a stone for a pillow, and he had a dream of a ladder with angels going up and down in that place where he was. There he heard the voice of God, the voice of blessing, promising him land and offspring and a future.

When Jacob awoke, he realized that that place where he was, that unlikely wayside stop where he had found peace and rest had become holy, because there he had met with God. And Jacob said, "Surely the Lord was in this place and I did not know it." He took the stone on which his head lay and poured oil on it and dedicated it as an altar to the Lord, calling it Bethel, the House of God, because there he had encountered the holy.

I don't know if this church, this sanctuary, is such a place for you. If you have happened in here for the first time today, perhaps not, not yet. But if the story of Jacob tells us anything it tells us that sometimes places become holy to us not for obvious

reasons, but for reasons that are hidden in the heart. And sometimes it takes time for that to happen, because everything depends on what we associate with that place, what we have experienced there, and who has been there with us.

Lovers know this; that transformations can happen in certain locations, that special meaning can attach to an otherwise ordinary place. It's why some noodle shop on Third Avenue is one of the most romantic places on earth to a couple, because it was there that they first realized that they were falling in love.

It's why a piece of ground, eight by four becomes sacred ground and not like any other, because someone dear to the heart has been laid in that soil for the remainder of remembered time, and a stone set up to mark the dates of living and dying.

The sacredness of a place depends on what we associate with it, what we have experienced there, and who has been there with us.

The unremarkable becomes remarkable, the profane becomes sacred because of what happens there and with whom. And so it is with sanctuaries and holy places, temples and mosques, cathedrals and wayside chapels tucked away on a country road in some upstate hamlet. Because there God has met us, or met others in a place marked and set aside and hallowed by memories, with times and dates that can be recalled, and moments we remember when we find ourselves saying, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it."

And so over time, a sanctuary becomes a treasured place of meeting, a well of spiritual strength from which we drink again and again, because there we have sensed God close.

People sometimes tell me at the door not only what they think of the sermon but also why they have come here and why they have returned. "We were married here by John Macnab forty years ago." Or, "Dad's ashes are interred in the columbarium in the balcony and here I feel a special closeness to him." Or, "It was here on a Sunday morning twenty years ago that I first heard the choir and they sounded like angels." The sacredness of a place depends on what we associate with it, what we have experienced there, and who has been there with us.

Fred Buechner in one of his books describes how the sanctuary of another Presbyterian church in this city became a sacred meeting place for him and how it changed his life. He writes that as a young man in his twenties here in New York,

I started going to church regularly, and what was farcical about it was... my reason for going, which was simply that on the same block where I lived there happened to be a church with a preacher I had heard of and that I had nothing all that much better to do with my lonely Sundays. The preacher was a man named George Buttrick, and Sunday after Sunday I went, and sermon after sermon I heard. It was not just his eloquence that kept me coming back, though he was wonderfully eloquent, literate, imaginative.... What drew me more was whatever it was that his sermons came from and whatever it was in me that they touched so deeply.³

I suspect over the years, among whatever it is that has kept people coming here, it has been something like that, something that touches us deeply, and it may not have so much to do with what is said or done as much as that our own heart is ready to hear and

to receive it. The words that are said here have been spoken before, but they may be words that our ears have not yet truly heard, because that deeper place within was not ready to receive them. The bread and wine that is offered at this table has been received here before. It is not enough to feed the malnourished body, and yet it is more than enough to satisfy the heart that is gnawingly hungry.

There is a place of sanctuary in the sanctuary, and we are meant to hear in such a place of meeting as this the Word that may inspire our living, and to receive the Nourishment that satisfies our souls.

Anne Lamott tells a story about a little girl, seven years old, who got lost one day and “ran up and down the streets of the big town where she lived, but couldn’t find a single landmark. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she found her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, “You could let me out now. This my church, and I can always find my way home from here.”⁴

The sanctuary we seek on earth is the one that leads us to the sanctuary of heaven. And while it is never enough to have only these little foretastes of the kingdom of heaven that we experience when we experience the holy on earth, it points us to the holiest of all. Which is why we keep coming back. Because from here, in the sanctuary, we can find our way home.

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¹ January 29, 2006

² Henri Nouwen, **Clowning in Rome**. Garden City, NY: Image Doubleday & Company, 1979. 37-38.

³ **The Sacred Journey**, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982. 108-109.

⁴ I have quoted and slightly adapted Lamott’s story. Anne Lamott, **Traveling Mercies**. New York: Pantheon, 1999. 55.