

“O God of Earth and Altar”

I Kings 8:22-52

A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

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One hundred years ago, the people of University Baptist Church has just laid the cornerstone of this grand building. For another six years, they would watch its construction and imagine being in this beautiful room. I can imagine their longing and perhaps even their grief in leaving behind a home that had been theirs for the past thirty years. I wonder if they considered Solomon’s humble temple dedication prayer. I wonder if they or we could live up to the great dreams that often get caught up in a building project.

So today, as we consider what space is sacred, we contemplate the words of Solomon as he prayed over the dedication of the first temple of Israel. It’s instructive to know that before the temple was established, the people were mobile. They carried the ark of the Covenant with them and established a tent of meeting wherever they camped. Maybe they got tired of carrying all of the accumulated temple items around. The set-up and take-down was taxing them, so they wanted to no longer be a roving group but a stable nation. So why not give the mobile ark a permanent dwelling place? Imagine the energy they could repurpose that had been used to set up and take down the holy adornments. So they set about to build a temple. It took years and lots of labor.

But they didn’t put the temple just anywhere. They put it up on the peak of a mountain. Imagine hauling all of those stones and lumber up to a mountaintop. Moses had encountered God on a mountain in the wilderness. Would God then appear in this house if they built and made it especially beautiful? I’m reminded of a cornfield in Iowa where the faithful heard the mystical voice say, “If you build it, he will come”.

All other religions and kings had temples and palaces. It’s instructive that the Hebrew people built a temple, but not a palace. They knew where true power lay. And this would be a temple that could be seen for miles. No need for a grand steeple. The mountain was its own tower.

This temple was placed on the holy peak of Mount Moriah, where Abraham had gone to sacrifice Isaac. A ram was there in the bulrushes that served as a substitute. Sacrifices on the altar built on that high place hearkened back to that original sacrifice. It’s no accident that Jesus was seen as the ultimate sacrifice to replace the ritual sacrifices. Six centuries later, Mount Moriah, or was it Jerusalem, was where the prophet Mohammed ascended to heaven. There is now a gold domed shrine on that peak called the dome of the rock. It is a holy place for three religions.

The temple had three layers to it. The courtyard was where everyone could gather. Centuries later, there would be a cost to get up to the courtyard. You couldn’t do so if you didn’t bring an offering, sometimes in the form of grain or livestock. Eventually, it was easier to purchase livestock and grain rather than cart it over from your homestead. So there were stables and storehouses established near the temple. Remember, the priestly class did not have land and only survived by the tithes of the people. When the Romans occupied the land, they let the Jews

keep the temple mount—maybe as a way of placating them or letting them think they had some power in the equation. By the time Jesus was around, an elaborate system of banking and commerce was in full swing. People lined up to purchase their cattle and sheep and grain. Others waited in similarly long lines to change their tainted Roman money into Hebrew shekels. On high holy days, it was chaos and it seemed that the commercial transactions were what it was all about. Ah, to go back to the heady days when the temple was first dedicated, with all of its idealism.

The interior of the temple was a segregated affair. Only men were allowed in. But not only that, but only men who had met their financial obligation and were considered restored or clean in the eyes of the priestly class. But you could only get so far in the temple.

There was a curtain at the very front of the temple. It hid the gold-plated and adorned ark of the covenant. Inside this box sat the tablets Moses brought down from Mount Sinai with the 10 commandments. This area was called the Holy of Holies. It was so powerful that only one priest was able to enter there one time a year on Yom Kippur.

When Jesus was crucified, the Gospel of John says that the curtain of the temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom. The Holy of Holies was exposed. What this means is that all those who entered the temple could not see the ark. It was seen as a great equalizer.

There are some throwbacks to the ancient temple even in this building. It was said to have been made of stone but adorned with wood.

There is even a holy of holies. Behind these wooden doors sits the baptistery. Where people secure their commitments to walk in newness of life.

The pleas of Solomon put great power in the Temple. It's the place where people can restore themselves, even after awful sin.

³³ *“When your people Israel, having sinned against you, are defeated before an enemy but turn again to you, confess your name, pray and plead with you in this house, **³⁴ then hear in heaven, forgive the sin** of your people Israel, and bring them again to the land that you gave to their ancestors.*

³⁵ *“When heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against you, and then they pray toward this place, confess your name, and turn from their sin, because you punish^[a] them, **³⁶ then hear in heaven, and forgive the sin** of your servants, your people Israel, when you teach them the good way in which they should walk; and grant rain on your land, which you have given to your people as an inheritance.*

When people went astray, came back to the holy temple, confessed their wrongdoing, God would hear in heaven and forgive their sin. But it required them returning to the Temple. For this is where God lived in a unique way. At the temple you could, we imagine, relearn the right way and get a fresh start. And so people went on pilgrimages to the Temple where God would hear their cries and forgive their sin as Solomon suggested in his dedicatory prayer.

We don't put such great stock in buildings these days. They come and go. They are not meant to last 100 years, at least the buildings that get slapped up quickly nowadays.

But there is something about stone and steel and woodwork that says permanence.

The first temple lasted for over 300 years. The second temple lasted about 500 years. And you still have people making pilgrimages to those sites because it represented a bygone era and a hoped for future.

When our bell choir was in Germany a few years ago, we had a full day with a community bell choir. We met in the shadow of the old church building that was at least several hundred years old. The bell tables were set up in a small modern addition across a courtyard. It has classrooms and a nice rehearsal space and we enjoyed playing dueling bell choirs. At a break time, we asked if we could go inside the old church across the lawn. They scoured up the keys and let us into this big beautiful room. It was March and it was cold. They admitted that they didn't really use this church too much. It was just too expensive to heat. They cranked up the boiler once or twice a year. The bell practice room was actually their more economical sanctuary. But they looked at the old stone church with a conflicted sense of longing and resignation. It just wasn't practical to use anymore. But it's high steeple and ornate wood and stone work, even its old organ all said permanence, or maybe it pointed to wonder.

What is this God to whom we build altars in the earth?

There is also something about God in this prayer of Solomon. God is forgiving. Over and over again, forgiving. Solomon lists all sorts of sins and all God requires is coming to the temple. This earthly altar. And it's in God's nature to forgive and restore you. That's good news.

So what does this temple mean—this earthly altar that we make?

What makes it holy?

Is it what we do in it?

Is it that it is open and welcoming to everyone?

Is it in its beauty?

Is it in its humility?

Is it in its memory?

Is it that it represents a forgiving God?

Is it that it is a refuge, a sanctuary from the burdens of the world?

Is it that there is something unnamable—maybe the prayers that have been spoken here, the songs sung, the pleading, the cries in the night, the hope when all hope seems lost?

I think it is all of that.

It is also not a destination, but a resting spot. It's a place to remember from which we came, and to which we are heading.

We give thanks for this great building and the saints who bequeathed it to us, I know I do every time I come in these hallowed halls.

But this earthly altar points us toward the one who forgives us. For forgiveness is not so much about atonement. It's about being set free.

Free of guilt.

Free of shame.

Free of debilitating doubt.

Free of the persistent pessimism that we are never good enough.

God sees it all and forgives.

That's where this earthly altar points us.

Of course, being forgiven by God does not take us off the hook. It does not negate our responsibilities. It makes us better able to live in healthy relationship with God and each other. And that my friends is a blessed gift that we should not take lightly.

As the hymn-writer said, not so much about a building, but of a forgiven life:

*Oh love that will not let me go
I rest my weary soul in thee
I give thee back the life I owe
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be*

*Oh light that followest all my way
I yield my flickering torch to thee
My heart restores its borrowed ray
That in thy sunshine's blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be*

*Oh joy that seekest me through pain
I cannot close my heart to thee
I trace the rainbow through the rain
And feel the promise is not vain
That morn shall tearless be*

*Oh cross that liftest up my head
I dare not ask to fly from thee
I lay in dust's life's glory dead
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be*