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 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
 Reformation Sunday, October 31, 2021
 Texts: I Kings 5:1-5, 8:1-13

Temple

Introduction to Scripture

We are reading highlights from the Old Testament. Today we come to the time when Solomon, David's son, was on the throne. First, we'll hear a passage telling how Solomon is making plans to build a temple, a permanent sanctuary, in Jerusalem, a dream that David was not permitted to fulfill. And then skipping all the chapters describing the temple's construction, we'll hear the first part of the dedication ceremony. Listen for God's word: *I Kings 5:1-5, 8:1-13*.

Sermon

Recently I actually read the *National Geographic* magazine that has been in our guest bathroom the past ten years. The cover story is about Gobekli Tepe (guh-bek-LEE TEH-peh), an archeological site in southern Turkey. It's the remains of the world's oldest temple, built some 11,600 years ago, roughly 6 millennia before Stonehenge. At the time of its construction, much of the human race lived in small bands that survived by hunting and gathering. Amazingly the temple's builders were able to cut, shape, and transport 16-ton stones hundreds of feet despite having no wheels or beasts of burden. The pilgrims who came there to worship lived in a world without writing, metal, or pottery. The author of the article says that we used to think that agriculture gave rise to cities and later to writing, art, and religion. Now the world's oldest temple suggests that the urge to worship sparked civilization, not the other way around.ⁱ

The human response to the holy is deep and, it appears, quite ancient. We know instinctively, we know in our gut, that there is more to life than what meets the eye. We sense there is a great Something Beyond that is greater than we can see or even imagine. Frederick Buechner writes:

At its heart, I think, religion is mystical. Moses with his flocks in Midian, Buddha under the Bo tree, Jesus up to his knees in the waters of Jordan: each of them responds to something for which words like *shalom*, oneness, God even, are only pallid, alphabetic souvenirs. . . . Religions start, as Frost said poems do, with a lump in the throat, to put it mildly, or with the bush going up in flames, the rain of flowers, the dove coming down out of the sky.ⁱⁱ

And so, in response to this experience of mystery, from the earliest times people have built temples and enacted religious rituals.

For the ancient Hebrews, before their impressive temple in Jerusalem, there was the tabernacle or tent of meeting. It was constructed just after the Exodus, during the time of Moses, when the children of God were in the wilderness. It was a portable sanctuary. It moved

with these nomads as they wandered across the Sinai Peninsula. Inside the tabernacle was the Ark of the Covenant, a wooden box that held the tablets of the law Moses had received on Mt. Sinai, also known as Mt. Horeb. While God could not be depicted as a statue or an idol, the ark did symbolize God's presence, a kind of visible throne for the invisible God.

When Solomon became king after his father David died, he inherited not just the throne but his father's dream of building a permanent sanctuary for the people's worship of God. The temple took seven years to build, was quite costly, and from the description of the biblical writer was a grand edifice. As we heard, Solomon enlisted the aid of a foreign king, the King of Tyre, to help supply timber and craftsmen. He also conscripted labor from his own people, 30,000 men. Not surprisingly, his heavy taxes and forced labor planted the seeds of later rebellion. On this Reformation Sunday, I can't help but think of the building of St. Peter's in Rome financed by the sale of indulgences. I also ponder the likelihood that the sanctuary where I stand was in part built by slave labor.ⁱⁱⁱ

When the temple was dedicated, there was a big parade, attended by "all the congregation of Israel," the VIPs, and, of course, the king himself. The priests carried the Ark of the Covenant and the Levites, the holy vessels from the tabernacle, and placed them in the new temple. Apparently, there was a barbecue feast involved because there were so many sheep and oxen sacrificed, you couldn't count them.

Language in our text reflects the primal experience of the holiness and mystery of God. It says: "When the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord."^{iv} *Cloud*—that misty, ungraspable, mysterious presence—and *glory*—that aura of splendor and majesty—filled the temple and made the priests weak-kneed. You can sense the writer trying to describe the indescribable, the ineffable. Solomon speaks and says, "The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness." (Do we hear echoes of Job here, speaking of the hiddenness of God?) and then addresses God directly, "I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever."^v

There is a tension in the biblical tradition between temple and tabernacle, between God dwelling permanently in a specific location and God moving about in sovereign freedom. Did you notice how the author of our text pointed out that while the Ark of the Covenant was hidden in the holy of holies, the poles that were used to carry it poked out beyond the curtain, a visible reminder of God's mobility, as it were?^{vi} We dare not presume to box God in.

There are beautiful sanctuaries the world over built to worship this Mystery at the heart of life we call God, this Holy One we experience with a lump in our throat, a tear in our eye, a skip of our heartbeat, and wobbly knees. Those worshiping here in person are sitting in one of the loveliest. Maybe you can recall other beautiful sanctuaries which you have frequented. Returning to a worship space where we encounter God in scripture, in sermon, in sacrament, in song over and over adds to its patina of sanctity. When I marry couples here, I tell them that this sacred space has been around since 1856. I ask them to imagine all the prayers prayed, hymns sung, and vows uttered in this space. There's good reason to consecrate a marriage in a church. It's more than just a pretty place. Churches and temples—ancient and modern—point us to the presence of the living God in our midst. They are places of worship where we respond to God with awe and wonder, praise and thanksgiving, but also with confession and repentance, righteousness and obedience.

This brings me to my second point, which is this: The God we worship is not only *holy*—that infinite mystery at the center of reality—but *good*—the source of morality. The God of Israel, the God we worship, is not some capricious deity of the Canaanites or Greeks to be appeased with appropriate rituals. This is a covenant-making God who is good and trustworthy and faithful and expects the same from us. Remember, the Ark of the Covenant placed in the very center of the temple contained the tablets of the law. The Ten Commandments that Moses received were the template for living in community in such a way that was life-giving. God is concerned with our day-to-day behavior. The prophets of Israel made this point repeatedly. Personal and social sin are incompatible with true worship. Ethics matter. As the psalmist cries, “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts.”^{vii}

However, none of us is perfectly righteous; we all have dirty hands. We must in honesty face up to our failure and the reality of human sin. Fortunately, God in God’s goodness is loving and forgiving. We are dependent upon God’s mercy. We see that mercy most clearly in Jesus, who was compassionate toward the downtrodden and caring toward those on the margins, who gave his life as a ransom for many. So, God is holy, and also God is good. Both worship and ethical living are the appropriate response to God. In other words, coming to church on Sunday’s important but so are the ways we act Monday through Saturday.

To tie all this into the Protestant Reformation, let me remind you that the reformers saw that the church needed a course correction. As for worship, Calvin held that the Word of God, which had become sidelined in the medieval church, should be central. In scripture read and preached worshippers encounter God. Calvin called for the removal of icons and elaborate decorations so that worship would be devoid of distractions. Worship is about humble reverence and glorifying God. You can see that we are Calvin’s heirs in the simplicity of this sanctuary, its central pulpit, and clear windows.

The reformers also argued for a more scriptural understanding of God’s goodness summed up in the catchphrase of the Reformation, “justification by grace through faith.” God commands obedience to a code of morality laid out in the law—yes. When we fail to live up to the commandments, i.e., when we sin, our relationship to God needs to be made right, i.e., needs to be justified. This happens solely through God’s grace and cannot be earned by good works or bought, as with the purchase of indulgences—a great fundraiser but terrible understanding of the nature of God. Indeed, we are justified by God’s action in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. His sacrifice was once and for all. Hence, you won’t find in Reformed churches an altar for the repeated reenactment of Jesus’ sacrifice. Instead, we have a Communion Table where we share in Christ’s forgiveness.

It was 500 years ago, in 1521, that Martin Luther stood before the pope and uttered his famous refusal to retract his protestant writings, “Here I stand. I can do no other.” The response? Excommunication. The reformers didn’t set out to start a new church but to reform the current one. They were in tune with our human tendency to get off course, to veer toward idolatry and tyranny. We constantly need “recalculating” as my GPS tells me often. Our Presbyterian motto is “Reformed and always being reformed, according to the Word of God.” In other words, we are constantly being called to self-examination and openness to new understandings and new ways of doing things as God is at work in our lives.

During this pandemic the church has had to be nimble. We’ve had to adapt. For

months we did not worship in our buildings and even now some people do not feel comfortable returning until Covid is banished from our world, a concern we certainly understand. We are like the Jews who had to adapt when Solomon's temple was destroyed by the Babylonians and the people were taken to a foreign land, and later when the second temple was destroyed by the Romans and not rebuilt. Scholars say that the Babylonian Exile was a very fruitful time with the emergence of synagogues and the compilation and editing of much of the Hebrew scriptures. People are saying that the post-pandemic church will look different—perhaps deeper engagement with our community outside our buildings. Perhaps more hybrid worship with online worship as well as in-person, or in small house churches (like tabernacles?). We do not know what the post-pandemic church will look like. But we do know that the church is in the hands of a holy and good God, a God who is both sovereign and loving, who elicits awe and obedience, the God whom we best worship with reverence and whose life-giving law we best follow. Amen.

ⁱ Charles C. Mann, "The Birth of Religion," *National Geographic*, June 2011.

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970), p. 74.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ronald L. Bogue, "Our First Church Buildings and the Building of Our Church," in *The First Presbyterian Church of Athens, Georgia: A Bicentennial History*, p.88.

^{iv} I Kings 8:10-11

^v I Kings 8:12-13

^{vi} I Kings 8:8

^{vii} Psalm 24:3-4