

“God’s House, Our Home”

Exodus 40:1-7, 16-19, 33-34

September 19, 2021

I have here a pamphlet that was published and distributed to the congregation of Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis in January of 1955. The cover of the pamphlet reads, “We Build the New Church.” The pamphlet outlines the plans for a dramatic change in the life of this longstanding faith community—the construction of a new church building. Here’s how pastors Jean Milner and Oakel Hall describe the opportunity: “One of our beloved Elders and his wife, who wish to remain anonymous, have made a gift to the church of a 21-acre tract of land on which several buildings can be erected across the years to meet our expanding needs...The land which has been given to us is a gently rolling terrain of unusual natural beauty making possible a striking landscaping development. On this magnificent site, we are proposing now to erect our first building... (in which) an entire church program will be conducted. In the course of a relatively few years, we anticipate several thousand new members will affiliate, (members) drawn from that whole northern suburban area of our city.”

That new building, of course, is the one in which we now worship. It has been expanded several times in the sixty-six years since those words were written. That whole northern suburban area is now very much a part of the city of Indianapolis. Those several thousand members now find their way here from points much farther afield, the rural farmlands of the 1950s, now subdivisions. Much has changed in our church and in our city, but I wonder if just for a moment you can put yourself in the shoes of those who received this pamphlet in the mail those years ago. It must have been a time of extraordinary energy *and* unnerving change in the life of this community. Can you sense the anticipation of reading those

words? *We build the new church.* A bold vision of what, by God’s grace, was possible for a church that was already well over a century old. A stake in the ground committing to a future yet unknown, saying, “*We will be here, giving witness to the Gospel, sixty-six years from now.*” And here we are, you and I worshipping in the “new” church.

Perhaps the distinctive mark of Christian theology is the belief that God Almighty, sovereign, majestic God of the universe, chose to take on human flesh and inhabit the material world. Because of this, we believe that our lives and the places where we live them out, have been touched by holiness. As Kentucky poet Wendell Berry writes, “There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places.” On the next three Sunday mornings, we’ll explore the sacred spaces that give shape to God’s saints—that’s you and me—equipping us to live as followers of Jesus in every part of our lives.

This morning’s first scripture reading is a testament to God’s providence and a confession of human limitation. The Psalmist, here imagined as Moses, proclaims that God is our dwelling place. That’s a powerful image, reminding us that no matter where we go on God’s earth, we are in the presence of God, that we live always before God. Simply acknowledging this truth has profound implications for *how* we live.

Early this summer, at bedtime, I was reading our four-year-old son Ben a book we checked out from the library—a silly about a dog who begins to quack, and then meow, and then oink, and finally moo. His mother, very concerned about her child, takes the dog to the vet who soon discovers that the pup

has a duck, and a cat, and a pig, and a cow all living inside of him. Intrigued by the idea, I asked Ben if he thought maybe we were all actually living inside a dog and didn't even know it. Ben looked at me, with sleepy eyes and skepticism, and said, "No, Dad, because I already know we live in God." From beginning to end, the witness of scripture confirms that four year old's certainty. *God is our home, our dwelling place.*

Still, there are particular places that convey God's presence in unmistakable ways for each of us. In the fortieth chapter of Exodus, God commands Moses, the leader of the people, to set up a "tent of meeting." What Moses constructs is not a building to confine God, or a structure to restrain God, but rather a particular place to encounter God's presence, to tune human sense to divine presence. A sacred space. God commands Moses to build a sanctuary.

Are there places that uniquely convey the presence of God for you? The majestic mountain terrain in the western Colorado town of Crested Butte is such a place for me. When I arrived there in September of 2009, I had never seen the Rockies before, and yet my soul felt at home. The presence of God is palpable in the cool breeze, the mountain vistas, those quaking aspens, just as God's presence is so strong for me in the town of Montreat, North Carolina, where I first articulated my own faith in meaningful ways as a teenager. I remember with joy the thrill it was for me to show Sara Duke Chapel (and Cameron Indoor Stadium!) for the first time and share the powerful memories those place hold for me. I think of the sacred space that is Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Overland Park, Kansas, where Sara was ordained a pastor and where our lives were joined in marriage. I think each of you could name similar experiences and sacred spaces. And so I conclude that there is something about our humanity, something about our souls that long to feel at home, that attach our experience of God to special places where God's presence is tangible to us.

Last month, several of you sent me a wonderful

piece by the writer Collin Hansen titled, "What We Lose When We Livestream Church." Let me first be clear in asserting that there is much that we have gained in expanding and improving online access to worship. We have seen so clearly since March of 2020 the importance of connecting across distance, of worshipping safely in times of health crisis, of conveying worship to those who are homebound or out of town, those who are caring for young children or aging parents, all who are otherwise occupied on Sunday mornings. These are worthy goals and good gifts of technology harnessed for holy ends. But I still think Hansen's point stands. He writes, "Christians need to hear the babies crying in church. They need to see the reddened eyes of a friend across the aisle. They need to chat with the woman who shows up early but still sits in the back row. They need to taste the bread and wine. They need to feel the choir crescendo toward the assurance of hope in what our senses can't yet perceive." Yes, ours is an incarnational faith, and the places where we encounter God matter.

Sanctuaries are sealed in the moments of meaning that happen in them. Consider again those sacred spaces in your own life; each of them home to transformative memories. *What we do here matters;* that's why we keep returning. Moses is instructed to bring a table, the Ark of the Covenant, altar for incense, lampstands for lights, a basin for holy waters—all symbols of God's special presence. This space, too, this sanctuary, is set aside for us to be together in the presence of God. Here we baptize our babies. Here we make our ordination vows and our wedding vows. Here we lift our voices in joyful praise. Here we listen as angelic voices proclaim the glory of God. Here we teach and preach the resurrection. Here we light the candles of Christmas joy. Here we invite children to hear the stories of faith. Here we will mark the celebration of our saints gone to glory and grieve our loss. My first week of ministry here, I remember an older member of the congregation walking with me into Milner Chapel, to the second row on the left and saying, "This is where I sat for my husband's funeral." You see, spaces

are sacred because of what we do in them, how we remember, why we return. Spaces matter because they hold who we are. Holiness happens in this room because we set aside space to meet God and speak holy words like, “Till death do us part,” “Child of the covenant,” “Glorious company of saints in light,” “The body of Christ broken for you.” *This* is the room where all of that happens.

Yes, God is indeed everywhere. God is our dwelling place in all generations and in every place we go. But we humans have always needed space and time set aside to reorient us to God’s constant presence. It’s why Jacob set up that pillar in Bethel. It’s why Moses built the tabernacle. It’s why Jesus worshipped in the synagogue. It’s why Mary made her way to the tomb. It’s why Paul started churches and Prisca and Aquila opened their home to host one. It’s the truth proclaimed in that vision of Revelation: See the home of God is among mortals.

We need reminders of that. Last week after worship, I spoke with a couple who had come back in person for the first time in many months. They explained that they had enjoyed worshiping in pajamas with their coffee in hand (both of which are fine with me, by the way), but they were eager to get back to this space. I asked them why. Answer: *I can’t multitask when I’m worshiping in the sanctuary.* I think that’s a valuable truth. If your life is anything like mine, so much of your time is spent doing too many things at once, and none of them very well. Coming to this space, setting this time aside, might just be the one practice in your overcrowded week that is only about one thing: experience the presence of God.

We need those reminders. So here in this room, despite changes in location, renovation, and re-decoration, the centerpiece of this sacred space has never changed and will never change. We gather in worship before the symbol of the cross.

The cross tells the story that is the heart of our faith and the only reason for our worship. The story of sacrifice and redemption. The story of freedom and responsibility. The story of the power of evil and

the triumph of love. And, rooted in that story, there are so many other stories that swirl through this room. The stories of faithful saints who have come before. Women and men who made sacrifice to lay the foundations of this church. I think about fifteen faithful souls who walked through thickets and along cow tracks to a cabinet shop to sign a charter for a new Presbyterian Church in a new capital of a new state called Indiana. I think of the thousands who have been baptized, confirmed, ordained, installed, and entrusted to God’s eternal care here. So many stories, and new ones being written all the time. This space is sacred because there is a story that lives here, a story of God and of ordinary people who find extraordinary faith, a story shared from one generation to the next. This place tells the story of God’s transforming grace in Jesus Christ.

I pray that you have sensed in recent months that I am convinced we are being called to write a bold new chapter in the story of Second Presbyterian Church. I’ve discovered that deep in the DNA of this congregation is the God-given call to be a church for the whole city of Indianapolis and, by extension in our time, to this whole region where God has placed us. To be a church for the city is to be a church whose vision is not myopically focused on this beautiful parcel of land, but cast out in those sacred spaces where God is at work, where God is asking somebody to tell about it, to do something with it, to be a witness to the truth that the home of God is among those who are suffering. That the home of God is among those who are struggling. That the home of God is among those who are striving and serving and leading and equipping. That the home of God is among all those who seek to live faithfully.

So we know that what happens in this sacred space will have echoes all over our city and far beyond it. That’s the story that God is writing among us. It’s the story I am longing to hear and eager to tell. *We build the new church.* Sixty-six years ago this vision of sacred space called a congregation to step forward in faith, and hear this: God is still calling, still moving, still making a home among us. It’s our

turn to take that next step—our turn to build not structures but to build up the body of Christ. Let us pray for the faithfulness and the courage to meet this extraordinary moment. Amen.