

Proper 24 (A); 19 Pentecost

19 October 2014

Exodus 33: 12-23

Sacred Space

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- ✘ In this morning's reading from Exodus we find Moses worrying about God's demand that the Israelites pack up their tents and move away from Mount Sinai towards the Promised Land.
 - ✓ But Moses doesn't want to leave.
 - After all, why would they want to leave Mt Sinai?
 - It was a holy space, where God descended on the mountain top and Moses went up
 - ◆ God and Moses met at the intersection of heaven and earth and Moses did not want to leave that sacred space in time.
 - But God had a greater vision for the people of Israel than just existing in that sacred space,
 - ◆ So he promised that on their journey he would go along with them, and by building the tabernacle, the Israelites would build a place that would allow God to descend to earth, no matter where the Israelites were.
 - ◆ Because that Holy Space would move along with the People of Israel
- ✘ The ancient Hebrews had a deep understanding of Holy Space
 - ✓ There are many places in the Hebrew Testament where the line between heaven and earth is blurry, where it's possible to have a powerful and immediate encounter with God
 - We find many Holy Spaces in the Hebrew Testament:
 - Shechem (where God had promised Abraham the land to Abraham and his descendants)
 - Bethel (Where Jacob saw the vision of the staircase connecting heaven and earth)
 - ◆ Named by Jacob: Beth (house) El (God)
 - Most especially in the tabernacle on the Temple Mount
 - ◆ The tabernacle forms the central feature of that space which connects heaven and earth.
 - ◆ It is the Axis Mundi: the central point of creation where heaven and earth link
 - We also find holy spaces in the Christian Testament: on Mt Tabor, the site of the Transfiguration, when Moses and Elijah joined Jesus on the mountain top
- ✘ We can also find sacred space at Christ Church:
 - We do have the ambry with the reserved sacrament;
 - To remind us the real presence of Christ and of the connection that we have to that space that goes beyond our mere existence on earth.
- ✓ As a footnote in contrast to St. Mary's Church, for example, where the ambry/tabernacle is just behind the altar and with its golden gates dominates the worship space,

- We Episcopalians think about the presence of Christ being manifested in various ways (as noted by the '79 Prayer Book working editor Howard Galley):
 - ◆ Jesus Christ is manifested in the midst of the people gathered in Christ's name
 - ◆ ...in the reading and proclamation of the word
 - ◆ ...in the persons who minister in the various ways (from ushers to choir to deacons, priests, bishops)
 - ✦ It's difficult to appreciate those various ways that Jesus is made present in the world if the gold box is right in the center of things
 - ✦ That's why you'll find it placed on the side wall of the chancel of the church
- ✕ Yet, because of this connection to the Real Presence, many have thought of churches as sacred spaces
 - ✓ To those of a certain generation, just the idea of vandalizing a church or stealing from a church was beyond thinking about
 - God was sure to see it
 - Punishment would be severe
 - ✓ Christ Church, for many years, was open during they day...until there was a break in.
- ✕ What changed?
 - ✓ 1. We somehow as a people seem to have lost our sense of sacredness of space, as far as churches are concerned
 - Perhaps that's because churches are less like temples and more like performance amphitheatres
 - ✓ 2. Perhaps the concept of sacred space is no longer being passed down from one generation to the next.
- ✕ And yet, despite all this dismissal of religious sacred space, for many people who call themselves spiritual but not religious (SBNO) the idea of sacred space still exists, particularly in nature.
 - ✓ How many times have you heard, "I'd rather be in nature on a Sunday morning than in church!"
 - ✓ ...And yet, how many times have you encountered God in nature?
- ✕ Just one example from my life, and I'm sure everyone has a similar story:
 - ✓ I was a Camp Counselor at Camp St. Malo in the Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado.
 - ✓ Leading a group of 15 Middle-schoolers on a 10 mile overnight hike to Long's Peak (one of the 14-ers)
 - ✓ Lots of enthusiasm from some and others were whining like only Middle School boys can do – "I want to go back;" "I'll just sit here and wait for you;" how much farther do we have to go?"
 - Add to that a little mid-afternoon rain, a daily occurrence in the CO Rockies. Break out the ponchos (no nylon...all made of Gates rubber)
 - Just as we topped the mountains called the Twin Sisters (at 13,000 ft); the sun broke out, a great mile-wide mountain valley opened up before us with a glaciated lake at the bottom of the valley and from the lake rose up the vertical

- face of Long's Peak ("The Diamond") a sheer 900 ft cliff in the shape of a cut diamond. And in the silence we could hear the voices of two mountain climbers working their way up the face of the height of an 83-story building. Two small pencil points on a great easel of paper.
- The boys were bathed in a Golden Light that only the Colorado Rockies at 13,000 can have.
 - And they were all smiling.
 - ◆ From the most intrepid to the biggest whiners, they were all grinning from ear to ear.
 - And no one said a word....and it was good.
 - For the rest of the hike, there was no more whining and everyone worked together
- × So what happened at 13,000 feet in the Colorado Rockies?
 - ✓ The kids and myself were brought into a state of awe.
 - It happens when people encounter a vast and unexpected stimulus,
 - Something that makes them feel small
 - ◆ And forces them to revise their mental models of what's possible in the world.
 - ✓ Abraham Maslow, the social psychologist, spoke of these as "peak experiences," which may even bring about a change in one's outlook on life, and a great sense of peace or joy.
 - The latest issue of the Sierra Club magazine's lead article is on the scientific study of Awe:
 - Recently, psychologists have found that, in the wake of these kinds of experiences,
 - People often feel a deeper connection to others and the world in general
 - ◆ Awe prompts people to redirect their concern away from the self and toward everything else.
- × So when people tell me that they'd rather be out in nature than be in church, there's a reason for that.
 - ✓ Because when people feel in awe in nature; however temporary that experience can be, it can change one's life in profound and permanent ways.
 - × And there's nothing wrong with that, and it's not anti-religious or anti-church to experience God in this way.
 - ✓ St. Ignatius of Loyola taught the Jesuits that it's possible to find God in all things.
 - × Finding God in All Places: That very simple phrase was once considered revolutionary...and landed Ignatius in prison under the Inquisition
 - × "Finding God in all things" means that nothing is considered outside the purview of the spiritual life.
 - ✓ Yes, spirituality can be found inside church walls, in silent contemplation, in the celebration of the Eucharist;
 - ✓ But God can also be found in *friends, family, work, relationships, sex, suffering, joy, in nature, in music.*

- × Ignatius understood that God does not want just to sit on a throne on high.
 - ✓ What God wants is to speak directly to us
 - And God will speak directly with us in astonishingly personal ways.
- × Why is that?
 - ✓ It's because we live in an Incarnational World.
 - God became human (“incarnate”) in the person of Jesus of Nazareth
 - With the incarnation comes the understanding that God can be found in the everyday events of our lives.
 - God is not just “out there.” God is “right here” too.
 - So if we're looking for God, *we just have to look around.*
- × Sometime God speaks to us in very simple ways:
 - ✓ Like hearing for the first time a full choir singing “I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light”
 - And sometimes, when we are in a state of awe and surrounded by kids bathed in golden light,
 - ✓ We can find God speaking to us in ways that are beyond intellect or reason, beyond competing theological views or philosophical proofs.
- × Sure, we can study the Bible and study the writings of the great fathers and mothers of the Church,
 - ✓ And we may, in that way, be brought to God.
 - ✓ But we also may be brought to God through the heart
 - Where in the quiet of nature or the quiet of sitting on the promontory of WA Park, or in a time of a Wednesday meditation service in Christ Church,
 - We may hear God speaking more gently
 - And it's at these times that God may be speaking the loudest.
- × During these times it's possible to feel a real connection to God, even though we may not identify it as such, right away; this will only come in reflection (Examen).
 - ✓ Ignatius' key insight was that these are the ways that God is communicating with us, and that God can communicate directly with us, without the mediation of bishops, priests, deacons or the teaching authority of the church.
- × Sacred space is all around us, we just have to look around and listen for God,
 - Because that pull that draws us to God *comes from God*
 - ✓ And when those times come, we can feel what St. Augustine described in the 4th century:
 - “Lord, our hearts are restless,” he wrote, “until they rest in you.”