

Reverend Claire Feingold Thoryn
February 1, 2015
Theme: Sacred Place
Homily: Around the Corner From the Truth

Call to Worship:

Good morning. I am Rev. Claire Feingold Thoryn. As Sally said, our worship theme during this month of February is Sacred Place.

Of course we will talk about sacred places like this one, but we'll also talk about all kinds of places that may not have seemed special to begin with.

The Zen Buddhist poet Jane Hirshfield has a short poem imagining if Bodhidharma, a 6th century Buddhist monk, were alive in the 20th century.

“Why Bodhidharma Went to Howard Johnson’s”

“Where is your home,” the interviewer asked him.

Here.

“No, no,” the interviewer said, thinking it a problem of translation,

“when you are where you actually live.”

Now it was his turn to think, *perhaps the translation?*

Here we are in our home, because it is here where we actually live; and we also actually live out there, and on the sidewalks and streets and in cars and houses and offices, and anywhere else we happen to be. In all of these places we are alive and standing on sacred ground, this Earth, our home. Today and all this month, may we honor our sacred places, wherever they may be.

And now our chalice, the symbol of our free faith, will be lit by Nancy Sofen.

Reading: “What’s In The Temple?” by Tom Barrett

In the quiet spaces of my mind a thought lies still, but ready to spring.
It begs me to open the door so it can walk about.
The poets speak in obscure terms pointing madly at the unsayable.
The sages say nothing, but walk ahead patting their thigh calling for us to follow.
The monk sits pen in hand poised to explain the cloud of unknowing.
The seeker seeks, just around the corner from the truth.
If she stands still it will catch up with her.
Pause with us here a while.
Put your ear to the wall of your heart.
Listen for the whisper of knowing there.
Love will touch you if you are very still.

If I say the word God, people run away.
They’ve been frightened—sat on ‘till the spirit cried “uncle.”
Now they play hide and seek with somebody they can’t name.
They know he’s out there looking for them, and they want to be found,
But there is all this stuff in the way.

I can’t talk about God and make any sense,
And I can’t not talk about God and make any sense.
So we talk about the weather, and we are talking about God.

I miss the old temples where you could hang out with God.
Still, we have pet pounds where you can feel love draped in warm fur,
And sense the whole tragedy of life and death.
You see there the consequences of carelessness,
And you feel there the yapping urgency of life that wants to be lived.
The only things lacking are the frankincense and myrrh.

We don’t build many temples anymore.
Maybe we learned that the sacred can’t be contained.
Or maybe it can’t be sustained inside a building.
Buildings crumble.
It’s the spirit that lives on.

If you had a temple in the secret spaces of your heart,
What would you worship there?
What would you bring to sacrifice?
What would be behind the curtain in the holy of holies?

Go there now.

Homily: Around the Corner From the Truth

Each month, going along with the worship theme, I offer a spiritual exercise to try out. And guess what. In spending those few minutes reflecting on a sacred place, we just did this month's spiritual exercise, and it is only the first day of the month! Our covenant groups will be sitting with this question of "sacred place" and what that means for them, and sharing stories about their places with each other. I hope that you have a chance to tell someone about the sacred place you went to just now, and to hear about someone else's.

In our reading, the poet says:

I miss the old temples where you could hang out with God.

We don't build many temples anymore.
Maybe we learned that the sacred can't be contained.
Or maybe it can't be sustained inside a building.
Buildings crumble.
It's the spirit that lives on.

A couple years ago I was privileged to take part in an interfaith trip to Israel with with other Boston-area clergy. It was very moving for me, as a minister who has studied a great deal about this place where so many religious and historic events occurred, and as a person of Jewish heritage. It felt, in part, like going home.

We went to Jerusalem to see the Temple—or rather, the place where the temple once stood. Buildings crumble.

Thousands of years ago in Jerusalem,
the Jewish people built their first temple,
the one known as King Solomon's temple.
First there was a great wall, surrounding a large courtyard.
Inside that courtyard is where all the money-changers and dove-sellers had their tables set up.
In the middle of the courtyard was the temple.
Inside this temple was a separate holy place, where only the priests could go.
Inside that holy place was a passageway to a room that was the Holy of Holies,
the most holy place.
Inside that mysterious room resided the Ark of the Covenant:
the tablets holding the commandments that Moses had received from God.

The legend says that when the Ark was first placed inside the Holy of Holies, the spirit of God descended,
"a cloud of the Lord."

I love that phrase, “a cloud of the Lord.” Sometimes I think snowstorms are what a cloud of the Lord would look like.

“We talk about the weather, and we are talking about God.”

But anyway. Only the highest Priest could enter the room of the Holy of Holies, once a year,
on the Day of Atonement.

There were no windows in the room
(and of course no electric light),
so it was completely dark.
But even in this complete holy blackness,
the High Priest was only allowed to enter blindfolded,
for even the highest Priest was not considered holy enough to see the presence of God.

When the High Priest went in,
the other priests would tie a thread to his leg.
That way—if he didn’t come out for a while,
and the other priests worried that he had died
from divine over-exposure,
they could pull on the string.

As our tour guide told us, “The presence of God can be a dangerous thing.”

But this holy first temple, Solomon’s temple,
was destroyed and looted by the Babylonians in 586 BCE.
And in that battle, the Ark of the Covenant disappeared.

No one knows for sure what really happened to it—there are many many theories as to where it ended up.

Steven Spielberg had the most dramatic theory, if you have seen the Indiana Jones movies...

Eventually the temple was rebuilt, and this temple was called the Second Temple.
The Second Temple is the one that stood in Jesus’ time.

But when this temple was built,
there was no Ark to place inside the Holy of Holies.

And so maybe—we can *never really know*—
but maybe deep inside the temple that Jesus visited,
the place where he prayed and preached outside its walls
the place where he got angry at the hypocrisy and oppression of the priests and police and rulers,
so angry he overturned the tables of the money-lenders—

Maybe when you went through the doorway into the Holy Place, and then through the doorway into the dark heart of the Temple, the Holy of Holies, there was simply: *nothing*.

An empty room.
A silent room,
A dark breathing space,
waiting to be filled with the presence of God.

Honestly, as a parent of two little kids, an empty dark room does sound pretty heavenly to me.

40 years after Jesus was killed, the second temple was destroyed, this time by the Romans, and it has never been rebuilt.

In fact, for years, the land on which it once sat was a garbage dump.

Only one wall, the Western Wall, remains.

The Western Wall was not the wall of the actual Temple itself.
It was part of the Wall around the courtyard which surrounded the Temple.

Beyond the Western Wall, these days,
standing approximately where the first and second temples stood,
is the area known as the Temple Mount,
and on the Temple Mount is a mosque called the Dome of the Rock.
Our group was not allowed inside.
But I can tell you the mosque is a beautiful octagonal building, and one of the holiest places in the Islamic tradition.

Buildings may crumble, but there is something about an octagonal sanctuary...

Inside the Dome of the Rock is a foundation stone that some think, *maybe*, is where the Holy of Holies used to be.

But we don't *know* where, *exactly* where, the Holy of Holies used to be.

It could be anywhere.

For Orthodox Jews, this can be terrifying—
the thought of accidentally stepping on the Holy of Holies and insulting God with one's presence.

There are signs all over the Temple Mount warning that the Torah forbids people to walk there,
“on account of its sacredness.”

I found this uncertainty exhilarating.

We don't know for sure where the Holy of Holies was,
but when you know you are in the general vicinity—
well, you could be standing right there at any time.
Anyone could be standing there.
Any number of people could be standing there,
from any religious tradition.
A pigeon could be standing there.

From nothing, from darkness, from emptiness:
to anything, anyone, full of possibility.

And both are precious, both are holy.
The sacred cannot be contained.
We are always just around the corner from the truth
And if we stand still it will catch up with us.

This sanctuary does not have 2,000 years of history,
But we do have 175 years.
People who were very much like us,
sat in these very seats,
wearing different clothes and haircuts,

and they prayed and loved and laughed and cried and hoped
and hung out with God
and made sure this building didn't crumble.
And the spirit lives on.

The spirit lives on, here, and everywhere:
in the holy of holies, and out there beyond the wall.

May we carry our sacred places
in the secret spaces of our hearts
and carry, also, gratitude and reverence for this world we have been given,
and find that every step we take
is on holy ground.

Amen.