

Sunday Nov. 1, 2020

Lesson 9: Sacred Spaces

Scripture: Gen. 8: 20-21; 12: 6-8; 28: 16-22; 1 Sam. 7: 10-12

Context:

Our scripture lesson today is a composite of passages from the books of Genesis and First Samuel. Both books are from the Old Testament and reveal God's presence in unlikely places and critical events. Each of the passages introduces us to someone who plays an important role in the history of the Israelites and the ongoing narrative of how God uses them to address the people of God.

Our first passage focuses on the story of Noah. Noah was charged by God to fill an ark with creatures as God flooded the world. After the water recedes, Noah and the animals can come out of the ark. In the passage today, we see how the grief of God over what has been done is mitigated by a desire to fashion newness for humanity.¹ As God has seen the destruction and now reflects on the beauty of the land, God resolves to never destroy the land again. Instead, God will give new life to all living things.

Fast forward to the story of Abraham, the patriarch of the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian faiths. This passage is one of the covenant passages tying Abraham to God. The translation of the phrase "worship in the Lord's name" means to turn to the one named as the single referent of life.² Abraham is naming God as the only one to whom Abraham will promise his life. Thus, this area becomes holy ground.

The last text from Genesis for today focuses on Abraham's grandson, Jacob, another one of the Genesis patriarchs. However, Jacob does not always function as a paragon of a patriarch. In the text today, we read of Jacob making his promise to God only after he has gone on the run after deceiving his father, Isaac. Jacob has a dream of angels descending and ascending on a ladder from the heavens as God speaks to him making promise after promise. God's appearance leads Jacob to make a deep commitment and override personal decisions.³ As a result of such a momentous change, the place is renamed and becomes a holy sight with a pillar to commemorate the event.

The last text dealing with sacred spaces comes from the book of First Samuel. Both First and Second Samuel act as history books to tell the story of the relationship between God and Israel. In this story, Samuel is dealing with the finicky nature of the Israelites and the threats of the mighty Philistines. Samuel and Israel cry out to God and God responds with thunder. This act of prayer by Samuel is not an isolated act of piety; it is a posture and inclination of life marked by trust and yielding.⁴ Thus, Mizpah is

¹ Brueggemann, Walter. "Genesis," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for First and Second Kings*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 80.

² Ibid., 124.

³ Ibid., 248.

⁴ Ibid., 53.

transformed and becomes a new place of covenant for the Israelites.

Application

Our scripture passages fall on the Christian holy day, All Saints Day. On All Saints, we remember those who have come before us and celebrate the saints in our churches who have died in the past year. These are the people who have seen life in its fullest and have perhaps help to build the sacred spaces where we worship. On this day, we remember how their lives have shaped us and continue to give meaning to us today as we enjoy the fruits of their labors.

In one of her sermons, Episcopal priest and writer Barbara Brown Taylor writes of “thin places,” where we catch a glimpse of the divine. She states: “There are what the Irish call, thin places—places where the veil between this world and the next is so sheer that it is easy to step through ... How it all works is a complete mystery, but there is no denying the effect.”⁵ A thin place is not necessarily some exotic place like the hills of Scotland on an early morning on the Isle of Skye. A thin place can also be a hospital room or even a lazy afternoon on the front porch. The thin place takes us into the presence of God and gives us a glimpse of God at work.

Our scripture passages today all have the people of God being brought into the presence of God in unexpected places and times. We too can have experiences where we come to know God and can be amazed at where the Holy Spirit is at work. We don’t have to travel somewhere exotic to see God at work in our lives.

I’ve often found that our saints can tell us that much in how they live their lives. There is a reason why people pour their lives and resources into places. They feel God at work in some place and they want it to be remembered and to be kept holy. There is a perception of how because God was at work somewhere, God can be found in that place again.

For me, the labors of the saints are not just found in certain places. The labors of their lives and stories can tell us things to help us experience God wherever we go. God is often in the business of showing up in our lives in the places we least expect with some of the people we would not suspect and in ways we could not expect.

When I come to All Saints Day, I often think of the saints in my life and remember their stories of where they encountered God, the thin places which drew them closer to God. I think about the saint who poured their energy into a talent they had and how it brought such joy to others. I remember the saint who taught me about the power of Word and how the morning devotion with coffee gave them strength. I think about the saint who shared with me the gift of hospitality and of finding God’s peace in giving back to others. There is the saint who loved to sit in a sanctuary to pray for others and hear God in the silence. And there is the saint who loved to feel God in the rhythm of a run.

During the week of All Saints, I give thanks for these saints and the gifts their thin places gave to them and me. I praise God for these saints who shared with me their labors and who continue to inspire me in my walk with Christ. And I remember to search for God in my own thin places, trusting God will reveal to me where God is speaking into

⁵ Taylor, Barbara Brown., “Thin Places,” *Home By Another Way*, (Plymouth, United Kingdom: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 58-59.

my life in mysterious ways. Hopefully, you are looking for your own thin places and giving thanks for the saints who shared their “thin places” with you.

What is a thin place for you? Have you shared your thin place with others? Why do you think God speaks to us in unexpected places? What saints are you giving thanks to God for today? How can you share your thin places with others?

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