

Oct. 27, 2013 - Solomon's Temple
1 Kings 5:1-5; 8:1-13

“What Does This Place Mean to You?”

Today's narrative lectionary story, to me at least, is about the importance and the danger of place. So I want to begin by asking you to think about this place, this space in which we worship. As I look around I see . . . *describe it*. And yet each week this place becomes a holy place. Bob sets up the altar, and you place the elements of Holy Communion upon it. So, tell me, what does this place mean to you? . . .

Sounds to me like (*or, I think of*) this place as kind of like Memorial Stadium. Any of you ever go there? It was a lousy stadium. What made it special was not the place but what happened there. The success of the Colts and the Orioles helped transform Baltimoreans from thinking they were living in a second class city that couldn't really accomplish anything into one that is producing an urban renaissance.

Maybe this place is like that. Maybe it helps through Word and Water and bread and wine transform those who come here into seeing themselves as God sees them. I hope so.

In today's reading we heard the bookends of the story of the building of the Temple. One reading was from the beginning as Solomon reaches out to his buddy Hiram who's got some of the materials Solomon wants to use. The other reading comes after the Temple has been built and is being dedicated.

It's hard for us to get our heads wrapped around how important the Temple was for the Israelites. We don't have anything like it. The only thing that comes anywhere near it is St. Peter's in Vatican City in Rome. Which by the way I couldn't get into because I was wearing shorts that day. If you want to hear what it's like, you'll have to ask Char.

Speaking of St. Peter's Cathedral on Reformation Sunday no less, perhaps you remember that it was the building of St. Peter's cathedral that in no small measure led to the Reformation. It's a huge place and cost a ton of money to build. And part of that money came from selling indulgences. If you paid for an indulgence, the Pope claimed, you could get your loved one or yourself out of purgatory sooner. Martin Luther thought this idea was crazy, wrong-headed, and dangerous. God's forgiveness, said Luther, is not for sale. God's forgiveness is given freely through the cross and resurrection of Jesus to all who have enough faith to ask for it.

Many Roman Catholics agreed with Luther. The problem was that the Pope had all these huge bills to pay, and indulgences were definitely helping. The building of Solomon's Temple had a dark side to it as well. It also was huge and expensive undertaking. To get it done, Solomon not only levied some pretty hefty taxes, he also conscripted, that is forced into servitude, many of his own people.

That's the danger of place. Elevating a place to a status it should not have can easily lead us away from our mission as God's people. It can lead us into great sins. Place can even take the place of God. I've met more than a few Christians who seem to think that their mission as God's people is to preserve their church building. That's pretty sad. The building is not the Church; the people of God are the Church; the building is just a place. What matters is not this place but what goes on here.

And yet. Place is not unimportant. Yes, God is everywhere. But I think we are more conscious of God's presence when we are in a place like this one. I don't know how often you are aware of God's presence as you go about your daily life. You guess is that you are much more aware of it when you come here. The symbols and the signs and what we do here make us alert to God's presence among us. And yes, God does go with us everywhere we go. But God has especially promised to be with us in places like this where we confess our sins, hear the words of the free (free for us, if not for Jesus) of the free forgiveness God offers us through the cross of Jesus. Jesus himself has promised to be here in a tangible, taste, and smell and see way in bread and wine. That's what makes this place special.