



THE FIRST PILLAR: A SANCTUARY IN THE WORLD

October 13, 2019, Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Genesis 28:10-22; Romans 16:1-16

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Jacob is the first person in Scripture, I think, to construct a shrine; that is, to dedicate a specific place where God's presence has drawn near. On the run from his brother Esau, on his way to find a wife, Jacob stopped somewhere between Beersheba and Haran to sleep. He took a stone and placed it either under his head for a bad pillow or at his head for protection, and there Jacob dreamed. A ladder or a staircase appeared with angels ascending and descending and God spoke to Jacob. To this trickster, this usurper of the family blessing, to him God makes a promise. God promises that the family inheritance Jacob had stolen will indeed be his, but by God's hand. God blesses Jacob, promising land and children and grandchildren to come. And then God promises even more, everything, really: God promises to be with Jacob everywhere and always. When Jacob awakens, he sputters, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it! How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." So Jacob sets the rock upright and pours oil over it, designating it as a sacred place that Jacob names "Bethel," which means, house of God.

Ever since, God's people have continued constructing and naming sacred spaces for the worship of God: places where we come to be present to God; places where we may feel God especially present to us. In our theology, of course, we believe God is present everywhere and at all times. We do not have to go to a specific place or wait for a special season to find God. Yet, it has been, and still is, the experience of religious, spiritual people, that place and time do matter. We long for a sacred place set aside to worship; to feel God's presence; to know him to be near.



It's why so many of you gather in this sanctuary every Sunday at 11:00 a.m. for the worship of God. And come to the chapel on Wednesdays, too, for the evening communion service. And every Wednesday at 9:45 and 1:00 the children of the Brick Church School worship with Adam and me in the chapel also. Week after week in these sacred spaces, we mark time, celebrate seasons according to the church calendar, rather than our daily planners or phone calendars that ping at us. Here, Sabbath interrupts our otherwise harried schedules. Here, we stop and enter a different kind of space. It is so different, we think there are things we should and should not do in this space where our community worships God.ⁱ

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The Brick Presbyterian Church organizes its ministry and mission around what we call the four pillars. Today, and on three additional Sundays, I will preach about each of these pillars in your life as a congregation. The first pillar is: Worship. Said more poetically, the Brick Presbyterian Church is: A Sanctuary in the World.

When I came for the interview with your transitional search committee, I stayed over to attend Sunday morning worship anonymously. I sat right behind a man I now know to be Kevin Greene. I remember him because, in the moments before worship began, I was speaking to someone sitting next to me and Kevin turned and looked in my direction. It was friendly-enough look, accompanied by that smile of his. But I wondered if it might also be a friendly “heads up” sign to a stranger. So, I glanced at the bulletin and read these words (you can read along if you wish):

Welcome. The moments before worship are a transition from “getting here” to “being here.” Since it usually takes a few minutes to quiet one’s mind, and to become open to the Spirit, it is most appropriate to give one’s friends a silent wave of the hand, a nod of the head, or a friendly smile in lieu of initiating a conversation.

Oops! It took me a few months of being here before I fully appreciated why those words are so important to you that they are the first words on the first page of your worship bulletin every week. Now, I get it. This is a noisy city! 24/7 we are

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* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



bombarded by horns and jackhammers, scaffolding going up or scaffolding coming down, animated conversations among people and among dogs. We rush from home to work, to school, even to church; juggling strollers and canes, umbrellas and bags stuffed with our nice shoes to replace our tennis shoes. So, entering into this space, setting aside this time for worship, requires indeed a transition from “getting here” to “being here.” Leaving the noise outside and finding quietude within.

It is truly right that the first pillar of this church is its intention to be/to offer: A Sanctuary in the World. Here is space and time set apart for something completely different than everything else in our lives and world: An hour with a different rhythm, different gestures, different words. Here are moments of silence and moments when we sing or speak in a unison rarely heard anywhere else. Here prayers ascend and the Word of God settles into heart and mind. The Brick Presbyterian Church is: A sanctuary in the World where order and meaning and peace center us amid the chaos and senselessness and polarization that swirls all around.

When you enter this Sanctuary in the World, you are not what you “do,” what you earn, or how you look compared to others. Here, you are welcomed, loved, included exactly for who you are as you are—a beloved child of God. And today our community grew larger by two as we baptized Christian and Raymond. They remind us that here we do not need to ‘earn’ our way “in” by accomplishments or good works or good grades—in fact, we *can never* ‘earn’ the priceless gift of God’s presence, the deep and amazing grace of Christ, the gift of Christian community, for it is all freely given by the God who first loved us.

A sanctuary is not simply a place; it is most profoundly a people. So I love the way Paul ends his letter to the church in Rome: calling name after name before signing off. The names are many and hard to pronounce. There is a reason for that—the names are of women and men, Jews and Gentiles. Their names are Greek and Roman and Latin, representing wealthy and middle class and poor people. The only thing they all have in common is Christ and their baptism in his name. Together, by the power of the Holy Spirit, they become, they are the church, God’s



messy miracle and gift in the world. It has continued to be so ever since. Think of all the names Deane Turner recalls in his history of The Brick Church—two volumes of names! What names would you call out today of those who mentored you in faith in this place or some other church? What are the names of those beside you now who make up the church? (If you aren't sure, don't worry—there will be name tags for everyone in the coming weeks!) We are brought together by God to be and to offer this above all: A Sanctuary in the World.

Now as your transitional minister, it is part of my call to both introduce and remind you of things you might prefer to avoid. So I want you to notice carefully the preposition of this first pillar: A Sanctuary in the World. We are not called to be a sanctuary *from* the World. Worship is not a retreat from the world, though it often provides a respite. On the contrary, it is in worship that we most deeply engage the world “God so loved,” as John 3:16 puts it; the world God still loves so much. In worship, we seek to love the world as God does. Here we lift up the concerns of injustice and suffering in our community, city, nation, and world. Here we search the scriptures to understand what God is asking us to do in our time. A core tenet of Reformed theology is that God is at work in history and enjoins us in the divine plans and purposes being worked out in real time, right now. As one Presbyterian theologian wrote: “One of the great services the church renders today is keeping alive a Christian conscience.”ⁱⁱ

During the Mission Review, members in the congregations expressed concerns about ‘politics in the pulpit,’ and rightly so if partisan politics or advocating for specific political candidates ever creeps in. But in our worship life, to preach and pray and sing toward God’s justice, mercy, hospitality, and humility, and compassion, as the prophets did in their time and Jesus taught and lived out in his—well, faithfully done such things are theological, not political. The earliest creed of the church, “Jesus is Lord” was both a confession of faith and a political statement. For the church declared this in the midst of an empire that proclaimed Caesar as Lord. Our worship should call us to cry out and live up to God’s thoughts which are not usually our thoughts and God’s ways that are not often enough our ways.



When God appeared to Jacob at Bethel, Jacob made promises in return. He said: “The Lord shall be my God. This pillar shall be God’s house; and all that God has given me, I will give a tenth back to God in gratitude.” The one who started on the lam in fear of his life, through worship, responded with joy. Jacob promised to God a portion of the resources entrusted to him, as generously as oil running down the face of a stone.

There are many versions of a certain parable. Robert Fulghum tells it this way: “...a traveler from Italy came to the French town of Chartres to see the great church that was being built there. Arriving at the end of the day, he went to the site just as the workmen were leaving for home. He asked one man, covered with dust, what he did there. The man replied that he was a stonemason. He spent his days carving rocks. Another man, when asked, said he was a glassblower who spent his days making slabs of colored glass. Still another workman replied that he was a blacksmith who pounded iron for a living.

Wandering into the deepening gloom of the unfinished edifice, the traveler came upon an older woman, armed with a broom, sweeping up the stone chips and wood shavings and glass shards from the day’s work. “What are you doing?” he asked.

The woman paused, leaning on her broom, and looking up toward the high arches, replied, “Me? I’m building a cathedral for the Glory of God.”

Fulghum said, “I’ve often thought about the people of Chartres. They began something they knew they would never see completed. They built something larger than themselves. They had a magnificent vision.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The first pillar of The Brick Presbyterian Church is worship for the glory of God. We are, and we offer, A Sanctuary in the World. We have ancestors in the faith to thank for this place. Now we are tending it with our time and talents and generous tithes. We do this in the time God has appointed to us. Yet, raising our eyes to the



arches, we see farther up, farther out. We tend this place for future generations God has promised. What a magnificent vision. Surely God is in this place.

Amen.

ⁱ Much of the language in this paragraph is drawn from an article by David Rensberger, "Reflections on a Spirituality of Space," in *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, 34 no.1-no.2, Fall-Spring, 2006-2007, 58.

ⁱⁱ John H. Leith, **The Church: A Believing Fellowship** (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 164.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Fulghum, **It was on Fire When I Lay Down on it** (New York: Villard Books, 1989), 74-75.