



Holy Places: Sanctuary

TEXT
Exodus 40:1-34

January 3, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This is a great new year's text. That's not why I picked it, but this does happen on New Year's Day. It says, on the first day of the first month of the new year, Moses set up the tent of meeting. It was a new beginning and an important moment in the story of faith, because now there was a particular place to go to be in the presence of God. There was a meeting place.

This summer I will return to Quetico. Some of you know it. It's a Canadian national park just across the border from Minnesota. My friend Brant introduced me to this beautiful land eight years ago. I go every year now. It is a place of canoeing/camping. It's beautiful. It's isolated. It's a holy spot for me.

Do you have holy spots you go to?

A few years ago, Carol and I took our kids to Charleston, South Carolina. Some great friends let us stay at their home on the beach there. It was a great week. One afternoon we took the kids to the Westminster Church. We went into the sanctuary, stood right at the front of the chancel. I told them, "Right here in this spot, I was ordained as a pastor. I made the same

promises that these officers will make today. Fourteen months later, I stood in that same spot to make marriage vows. We told them the story of that place. It is a holy place for me.

Those are important stories for our family, and those stories are connected to those places. Do you have places that you associate with those kinds of stories? I'm sure you do.

The Bible has places like that.

It tells of the patriarch Joseph. He was traveling, and God came to him in a dream. And when he awoke, he took a stone and anointed it and said, "Surely God was in this place, and I did not know it." He wanted to mark the spot where God had come to him. He wanted to remember the place; but more than the place, he wanted to remember what happened there.

Now let me state what you already know is true: God is not tied to any particular place. God is not more present in Quetico or by the Red Sea or in Jerusalem. Yet there is something about how we experience God that is tied to place.

That's what we find in this text from Exodus. God tells Moses to set up a tabernacle; he calls it a "tent of meeting."

Remember their situation. They are wandering in the wilderness. Egypt is behind them. The exodus is the story they will tell for generations. Moses has already received the Ten Commandments. They are placed in the Ark of the Covenant. And now God tells Moses how to construct a tent, where they can be in the presence of God. And as you could tell from the reading, they give great care to every detail.

The same is true with this place of meeting. We spent a lot of time on details. The pews are the same, but some of them have been moved so that our friends using wheelchairs can be in various places around the room.

We made the chancel accessible.

There is a new sound system because we want you to be able to hear and understand what is said. We are still working with that, but each week there is improvement.

New cameras are included for our online ministry. What we put on our website for live streaming will be more visually interesting to watch. I remember the day when people looking for a new church would look in the Yellow Pages or the Saturday newspaper. No more; it's all

online. We want our service to be high quality online.

Before Easter, we will install a beautiful organ. I am eager for that. It will be beautiful.

We kept the cross that was placed on the wall and hung it here so that we are always beneath the cross of Jesus.

I could tell you more, but you get my point. We paid attention to details because this place matters to us. This is the room we have set aside to be in the presence of God.

It is here that we will baptize our children. It is here that we will make our ordination vows and our wedding vows. It is here that we will sing the resurrection and light the candles of Christmas. It is here that we will meet God.

It's not that God is tied to this room; no, God is met anywhere. It's not that God is any different in this room; but maybe we are. Maybe we learn in this room just who God is that we meet.

So what makes this room a sanctuary? There is so much in this text that we could talk about, but I just want to point to two things that are important.

The first is that the tent of meeting is the place where the Ten Commandments were kept. The giving of the law was more than just a provision of a list of rules, things to do and things not to do. It was an identity. It was a way of being.

To say it more simply: There is a story that is the center of this place. When we come into the presence of God, if we are going to have a clue about the nature of

the God we meet, we will have to remember the story — for our lives are just a small portion of the long story of God.

The first is that there is memory in this room of what God has done, of who God has been.

I spent a year at Yale Divinity School, and while there I studied black theology. The truth be told, I knew absolutely nothing about it before I began my coursework. I just knew that it was something I wanted to know more about.

I read everything that Martin Luther King wrote, which was quite a lot. But not only King; I learned about Malcolm X ... and Marcus Garvey. I read W.E.B. DuBois ... and Alice Walker ... and James Cone.

I didn't know the first thing about any of these black thinkers. But what surprised me, and I don't suppose it should have surprised me, is that my black classmates hadn't heard of them either.

But something happened when they learned of the contributions and the genius these thinkers displayed. They began to talk about themselves being part of a larger story. It was as if memory was being given to them.

If this room is a tent of meeting, the first thing it will do is remind us that we are part of a larger story — a story that reaches all the way back to creation when God, in an act of love, spoke the world into being; a story that reaches all the way back to Abraham, when God and Abraham counted the

night stars together; a story that reaches back to Moses on a mountaintop speaking a way to be in this world; a story that reaches back to a manger filled with straw and holy love ... and later, a tomb empty.

There is a story here — a story of faith and faithfulness. It is a story of God, of God's redemption of God's people. So in this sanctuary, we are given the memory of our story of redemption.

A couple days after we showed the children the church in which Carol and I were married, we drove from Charleston to Columbia, South Carolina, and took them to the sanctuary of the Seven Oaks church. We walked them into the sanctuary and stood by the baptismal font. We all touched the water and told them the story of their baptism that happened right there. I want them to know that they, like all of us, are part of a larger story of God's work of redemption.

That's something that happens in a tent of meeting: We remember all that God has done.

But there is a second thing that happens in the tent of meeting. The first day of the first month of the new year, Moses does everything that God has commanded. He follows God's instructions carefully; and when the tent of meeting is completely set up, the text says, "So Moses finished the work."

This is the way stories in the Bible are told; the language echoes the creation story. If I understand it, worship is always an act of new creation.

I don't know if you made resolutions or not, but for many of us, when the calendar turns, we pause and reflect on what we want the future to be.

In a similar fashion, it says in the first month, on the first day of the month of the second year, it's New Year's Day, a time of new beginning. In a sanctuary, we not only remember what God has done; but in a sanctuary, we remember what God wants the future to be.

I remember reading about Admiral Jim Stockdale. He was a POW in Vietnam from 1965 to 1973. He was tortured over 15 times during his eight year imprisonment. He was kept in solitary for years. He was asked once, "Over all those years, how did you deal with it all?" Admiral Stockdale said, "I never lost faith in the end of the story."¹

In the presence of God, we are reminded of the end of the story. Jesus describes the end of the story as the kingdom of God. We refer to it as God's promised day.

It is life as God intends it. It's where that which is broken in your heart is mended.

It's where that which is bruised in your life is comforted.

It's where that which burdens you is lifted.

It's where that which is sinful in us is redeemed.

It's where that which sets us against one another is eroded, and we see each other as brothers and sisters, all children of God.

It is the day when there is no more crying — because it's not we who die, but death that dies.

That's the end of the story.
That's the good news.

In this room, we see the world as it is, but we also see the world as the power of God's love can make it. And we live toward that day.

It's just a room, but in this tent of meeting, we remember all that God has done and all that God will do. We all need a place like that.

¹Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (2001), p. 83

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.