

“Finding God”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
August 27, 2006
Scripture: Psalm 84

Barbara Brown Taylor was a stressed-out Episcopal priest in a busy city church. One day, to relieve stress, she took a trip to the north Georgia mountains. And in her new memoir, she describes her first encounter with a church that she would later serve as pastor.

Simply to stand in the presence of that building was to rest. Peace poured off the white boards and caught me in its wake as the sighing of the pines reminded me to breathe. When I did, I could feel the clenched muscle of my mind relax. My shoulders came down from around my ears. I shook out my arms and put my hands flat on the side of the church. Was this what happened to wood that had soaked up a hundred and fifty years’ worth of prayers? Did all of that devotion seep into the grain like incense so that any passerby could catch a whiff of it?

When I walked up the painted gray steps of the porch, the old boards creaked under my feet. I stood in front of the heavy doors, which had survived so many humid summers that they scarcely met anymore. When I bent over to look through the huge keyhole, I could see a narrow slice of the sanctuary but no more. I tried the doorknob, mostly to feel the cool metal under my hand, but when it turned I was not really surprised. The generosity of this church was already established fact in my mind.¹

“How lovely is your dwelling place” begins Psalm 84. “A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.”

As I read Barbara Brown Taylor’s description of the small mountain town church, my mind wandered to a different church. Set in a capitol city, with an ambitious seating plan, and a similarly long history. And I thought back to my first moments in this sanctuary – dreaming about the future of Central.

What do you remember from the first moment you stepped into this space? Is it the bust of the first pastor John Riheldoffer situated in the narthex staring at his successors in the pulpit? Or was it a real person standing at the door to greet you – a living person, who smiled and said welcome? Do you remember the high dome ceiling? The mighty organ pipes? Or was it a brilliant sunny morning, and you were captivated by the stained glass windows?

Like Barbara Brown Taylor, I also think of the wood that has soaked up more than one hundred and fifteen years of prayers since this sanctuary was rebuilt in 1889. Prayers offered as couples proclaim their love and offer sacred vows. Prayers offered at baptisms, as parents make promises as to how they will raise children. Prayers offered for courage in the face of death, and in thanksgiving for lives well lived. Prayers offered for peace during the Spanish-American

War, both World Wars, and in every war and conflict since. The pews and woodwork here have been stained with tears and polished with prayers and hopes and dreams.

There is a basic worldview that this Psalm expresses, a worldview common to many religious traditions. That there are sacred spaces where people gather to find God. Sacred spaces where prayers can be said and heard, where hymns may be sung, where old words find new relevance. Holy spaces where people have trusted that they can find God.

Judaism proclaimed that at the very center of the universe was the temple. Located in Jerusalem on the high place that is the temple mount of Zion, the peaks of the temple stretched up and the heavens bent low. And sacrifices were made at the navel, connecting the very lifeblood of God with the lifeblood of the earthly creation. And so, when the people went to find God, they went to the temple.

It is a beautiful vision, this Psalm. “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.”

The temple is not just for humans, but a place where God and all of creation meet. The Psalm sings of running waters and rock altars. “Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young,” the Psalmist continues. This October, we will acknowledge that God has an abiding passion for the safety and blessing of all creation, and we will welcome even the sparrows into our sanctuary for a Sunday for a “blessing of the animals.” Even the sparrow finds a home, the Psalmist dreams. And on October 8, for one day at least, the parakeets will find a home alongside the pigeons. On that day cats and dogs, the gerbils and the birds will be at home here in this sanctuary. Caged and leashed, yes. And carefully placed, of course, but welcome here in the dwelling place of the Lord. It will be quite a day – my soul is already close to fainting as I imagine that day!

Of course, the holy courts of this sanctuary will need preparation for that day, and indeed, for every day on which we gather. So much love and care goes into making this space ready for our prayers. So much dedication to maintaining the building, vacuuming the carpets, straightening the hymnals and making sure there are offering envelopes. Psalm 84 knows that the work is not always glamorous, but full of meaning nonetheless. “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness,” the Psalmist volunteers. In another translation of this Psalm, Eugene Peterson puts it this way. “One day spent in your house, this beautiful place of worship, beats thousands spent on Greek island beaches. I’d rather scrub floors in the house of my God than be honored as a guest in the palace of sin.”²

Now it is a lot more fun to scrub floors in the company of other friends than to do so alone. And in a few minutes Camille will describe an opportunity to gather here together on a Saturday morning, making this space beautiful and ready for a new program year. I will be here, and I hope you might join in as well, polishing the wood, cleaning the windows, making this sanctuary a beautiful home for all who seek to find God.

Biblical scholars suggest that this Psalm was used as pilgrims made religious pilgrimages up to Jerusalem. The Psalmist asks God to “look on the face of your anointed.” And that prayer that the king be accepted is evidence that the king himself was part of the procession and the ceremonies of its approach to the courts of the temple.³ Onward and upward the procession went, from the king to the children of the faithful, looking to find God in the temple.

But does this Psalm mean that God can only be found in the temple or at church at the right time?

Whenever I have the privilege of officiating at a memorial service or funeral I am struck by the pictures the family chooses to display. Often, many of the pictures show the family at a lake, at a private sacred space. In the pictures, each year shows the kids a bit bigger, the dogs older, the hairlines receding and the faces aging. But in those pictures, as I wait to enter into the sanctuary or a chapel, I get a sense of what, for the family, was a sacred space where God was found. Sacred space is not limited to the temple.

Other Psalms and other stories talk about finding God in mountains and lakes, in the city and in the wilderness. Jesus himself, the gospels record, went hiking up into the hills in search of a quiet space to pray, to connect with God. Whenever people try to explain to me why they have not been at church recently, especially during the summer, I say that I understand – God can be found in many places. The temple, the church does not have a monopoly as God’s dwelling place.

But there is something special about a place like this. Something sacred, something bigger than any one individual’s space. Hallowed by history, sweeping in its design, the church is indeed a sanctuary where we interact with God. James Mays writes,

For Christians, the era when ark and temple were visible signs of an invisible presence of God in Jerusalem belongs to the time of the Old Testament, but that does not mean for us that God is placeless. We exist in space and time . . . We “go” to God. Every visit to a temple or church or meeting of believers is in a profound sense a pilgrimage. We “go,” not just for practical or personal reasons; we go theologically.⁴

We go here to church, trusting that in that pilgrimage we will find God. That as our voices rise together to sing opening hymns like “God is Here,” we will begin an encounter with God. We go to church, trusting that we will encounter someone or something that will make us see ourselves and the world a little bit differently. We go to church, trusting that we will be seen in a different light – not just because our reflections are shaded by the refractions of light coming through the stained glass windows, but because we are seen here, as being created in the image of the God we worship. We go to church and meet with people from all walks of life, and we realize that we are all traveling through this life, and here at church we recognize our equality as fellow pilgrims and the sacred worth of each person.

Near the end of her memoir, Barbara Brown Taylor writes,

Gradually I remembered what I had known all along, which is that church is not a stopping place but a starting place for discerning God’s presence in the world. By offering people a place where they may engage the steady practice of listening to divine words and celebrating divine sacraments, church can help people gain a feel for how God

shows up – not only in Holy Bibles and Holy Communion but also in near neighbors, mysterious strangers, sliced bread, and grocery store wine. That way, when they leave church, they no more leave God than God leaves them. They simply carry what they have learned into the wide, wide world, where there is a crying need for people who will recognize the holiness in things and hold them up to God.⁵

May it be so. May it be so here among us. The church is not a stopping place, but a starting place for discerning God's presence that shows up throughout creation. Amen.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006) 11-12.

² Eugene Peterson, Psalms (The Message translation) (Colorado Springs, NavPress, 1994) 121.

³ James Mays, Psalms, in the Interpretation Bible Commentary series (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1994) 274.

⁴ Mays, 275.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, 165-166.