

A Dwelling Place for God

II Samuel 7:1-14a; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56; Psalm 89:20-37 7-23-06

Some of you know that five years ago, to this month, I was blessed, by a dear friend of mine, to be part of a group that went to Russia. I traveled with a method of Methodists from Minneapolis, Father, forgive me, who had an interest in several small churches that denomination had planted there. This group was also involved in something known as the Russian Farm Project. I had studied the Russian language in high school and majored in it in college with a smattering of Polish. Dzień dobry. Good morning.

While I had graduated from college thirty-five years before the trip, I was amazed at how much of the language had remained with me. Brushing up on my conjugations and declensions, as well as basic vocabulary before the trip was a task—mostly finding the time and trying to get my ear back. But when I arrived at the airport in Moscow, after a long trip, I was surprised to be able to read all the signs and to understand what was being said to us. It was as if I had been transported back to a place I had been before, long ago and far away.

Along with the language during my younger years, I had also studied a great deal of Russian and Soviet culture. When we arrived in Moscow, the present government had come into power and it was fascinating to learn from the young men and women, who acted as guides and interpreters for us. how the country had started to turn a bit from the days of Gorbachov to the days of Yeltsin to the days of Putin. It is still interesting to observe. But, that is a discussion for another time and, most likely, another place.

In my studies as a young person, I had written a paper or two on the survival of Russian Orthodox Christianity during those long Soviet years when religion was a “no-no.” Not knowing what to expect, I was surprised, in Moscow, to see the Cathedral of Christ the Savior which had been completely rebuilt from 1990-1999. The original Cathedral was built by the architect Konstantin Ton between 1839 and 1881 to commemorate Russia's victory over Napoleon in the Napoleonic Wars. The church was later demolished in 1933 on Stalin's orders, but was built anew in the 1990s. It was and is breathtakingly magnificent. As a much holy place now as a place of tourists. It is the largest cathedral in Russia, up to 10,000 people can fit in it. Over 22 meters of walls are frescoed, more than 9,000 meters of which are gilt. The icons run floor to ceiling. No small task since the height of the cathedral, including cupola is 103 meters. Three altars are in the upper church.

To the eyes of a Congregationalist it is very showy. It was and is meant to be the finest of God's dwelling places. But, as in most cases, the churches that seemed nearer to the heart of God were those in the smaller villages.

I well remember the first we visited during a service. The worshippers were few, mostly older women with some young people mixed in. Not grand places but beautiful places where those who came to worship had been those who created a dwelling place for God deep within themselves during the years they struggled to keep their religion alive.

As the service moved along I was transfixed. My fellow travelers were moving around checking everything out while I was caught in the interplay between priest and the congregants as they chanted well known responses in well known cadences back and forth. Upon leaving the building, Vladimir, one of our guides, asked me how I liked it. I asked if he would understand what I meant if I told him I “had a Russian soul.” Another of our guides told me yes, they all understood, they had talked about it, “it is written on your face.”

In thinking of our scripture reading from II Samuel a few days ago, I thought of the dwelling place for God King Solomon would later build. It would be a grand place, a place where faith was to be centralized a place where all could come to renew themselves and offer up their prayers. It was a lot like the cathedral in Moscow. But still, the work of the faithful Israelites would go on wherever they were located in spite of the size or the shape of the building they were in or the lack of it. God told Nathan that there was to be no hurry in building a dwelling place of

cedar. The stabilization of the nation Israel under a good king was to come first. God had faith that a religious remnant would remain until a formal house of worship was constructed. God was quite right.

This knowledge dwelt in the heart and mind of Paul years later. We need to remember that the early churches Paul's letters were addressed to were not churches in the way we think of them at all. They were usually gathered in homes and they moved on occasion for safety's sake. There was no official edifice. A building did not tie those bands of believers together. They were bound together through the being of Christ. Jews and Gentiles alike, insiders and outsiders, those worthy and those not were all joined together in a holy temple not of bricks and mortar but of the spirit. Wherever those early believers went, a dwelling place for God went along. A place not built with earthly hands but within the soul.

The traveling ministry of Jesus was an example for those who set about carrying out his mission. They were not anchored in one place but were called to be itinerants seeking out places of welcome where they could go to do for others and be examples of the right way of living they had learned from their friend. He modeled an itinerant way of life and ministry as seen in this morning's reading from the gospel of Mark. He went out to people instead of having them come in to him. Only later in the history of our faith were there set places for worship.

We have a very beautiful place of worship right here on the Green in the center of town. It was originally built as a multi-purpose meetinghouse as so many early churches in New England were. It was set as an anchor to the area that surrounded it, a center of civilization. On the very best of days it still is that. Imagine how this town would look if the church were suddenly swallowed up into a hole and disappeared forever. If that were to happen, what would become of those who cherish and use this place? Would they become itinerant preachers moving from place to place to carry the word of God to others? Would they seek ways to rebuild it? Or would they simply scatter after burying what remained of this place and move on eventually forgetting that it ever existed? Would someone come along and insist that there had been some value here and that it needed to be reconstructed and used once again?

I guess the answers to these questions lie in the work that we choose to do in this place, in this little center of civilization, now. If we believe and sense ourselves to be bound together by the purpose of Christ and through the being of Christ, we will never have to ponder and answer them. If we, instead, allow other foci to pull our minds and hearts away from the mission of love and faith we have been called to serve and share, there may come a time when all we have been and all we are will be gone and recorded only in some history book.

As for all the faithful through the ages the way we must go resides in our hearts and souls. We know what it is, as the followers of Christ, God requires of us. All we need do is choose wisely. Amen