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 Proper 16 B: 1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43  
 August 23, 2009 St. Anne's Church

*A House for God*

Joe, my husband, and I are looking for a home. We have a wonderful place to live while we look. It's close to here – so, convenient for my work and a great base from which to explore Annapolis, and we are so grateful to live there. But it won't be, long-term, our home. So as we look around at houses to rent or buy, we find ourselves thinking about what kind of building makes a home. Not just a place to store our stuff or provide shelter or have our mail delivered to – all of these are blessings to be sure – but what makes four walls and a roof a home?

What is home? It may be a physical location, or be found in a physical location, but it seems to be more than mortar and bricks, rain gutters and electrical outlets, drywall and duct work. In fact, physical houses come with some inherent difficulties. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "A man builds a fine house; and now he has a master, and a task for life: he is to furnish, watch, show it, and keep it in repair, the rest of his days." There's a whole category of work called "housework." There are people who are pros at that kind of work, making a house hospitable and comfortable through their efforts. Then there are those of us who subscribe to the view of one person who said, "My idea of housework is to sweep the room with a glance."

What is home?

I ask because our first reading this morning is King Solomon's prayer as he dedicates the first ever temple of God in Israel. This is his prayer at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the brand new House of God.

His father, King David, had wanted to build a temple, but God had no. The Israelites had been a people on the move -- brought out of slavery in Egypt, sojourning in the wilderness, settling into the promised land. Through all that time, before they had a land called home, their symbolic place for God's presence with them was the tent of meeting. It was portable, like they were. Unlike other peoples around them in the ancient Near East, they didn't worship a god who reigned over a particular geographic location, a deity whose power was limited to a certain area. Their God was the God who created the universe, who was the God of all the peoples, who flung the stars into the heavens, and made all the fish of the seas, who delighted in creation – all of it, not just a certain few acres. This God went with them, leading them, guiding them, loving them, and commanding them to be a blessing – not just for themselves, but for all people; "a light to the nations" is what God called them to be.

But after they had settled in their new land, and gotten a king, and set up some government, and built houses for themselves, it made sense to King David to offer God a more permanent dwelling place too. But God said no. I'll let your son do that.

And Solomon did. It was, by all accounts, a beautiful House for God. It was built of huge quarried and dressed stone and cedars from Lebanon. It had bronze pillars, bronze stands, and bronze basins; carvings of cherubim, lions, pomegranates, and palm trees. It had lampstands of pure gold; cups, incense dishes, tables, and an altar, all of pure gold. Marvelous – a place that pointed people toward the glory of God.

But Solomon, in his wisdom, knew that no matter how glorious, how marvelous, how magnificent a house he could build for God, no one place can contain God. Solomon prays, “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!”

And then Solomon prays two interesting things: he prays to God, “that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place.” And Solomon prays that when foreigners, non-Israelites, pray toward this place, when they see this temple and hear of God’s mighty acts, that God will listen to their prayers too. In other words, the House of God, does not contain God, does not limit God. It points people toward God. It reminds them of God; it gives them a glimpse into God’s holiness and glory. And not just for Israelites, says Solomon, not just for people who would call this place home, but for people who are away from home too. When they see the House of God – they too will know that God hears them, even if they are far away from home. This home can remind them of God who is really the Home of us all. Solomon knew that the House of God should be a place that doesn’t just draw people into it, but being in God’s House should point beyond the House too.

As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “The Bible . . . trusts the world to be a place of encounter with God. . . . People encounter God under shady oak trees, on riverbanks, at the tops of mountains, and in long stretches of barren wilderness. God shows up in whirlwinds, starry skies, burning bushes, and perfect strangers. . . . The House of God stretches from one corner of the universe to the other. Sea monsters and ostriches live in it, along with people who pray in languages I do not speak, whose names I will never know.”<sup>1</sup>

The whole world in God’s House and the Home of the whole world is God. God cannot be contained in a place, even a beautiful place.

But somehow, we humans do better when we have some places to remind us of the holiness of everything. The universe is too large, so we need a holy place we can see and touch and care for to remind us that there is no place where God cannot be. The family of all humanity is too large for us to really love in tangible ways, so we need a parish family to learn forgiveness and hope with. We need real live human beings with whom we pass the peace so we can learn to reach out in peace to people whose languages we do not speak and whose names we do not know. This is something we experience a lot in church: where the part reminds us of the whole, where a small, visible reality reminds us of a gigantic sometimes invisible truth. Like a tiny piece of bread and a sip of

wine to remind us of God's abundance and give us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. Like spending an hour in worship every week to remind us that all time is holy.

We gather together in this House of God, not because God needs a piece of real estate on Church Circle in Annapolis. But to remind us, here in this beautiful and blessed place, that we worship the God whom no place can contain but who is closer to us than our own breath. We care for this House of God to remind us to care for the whole world. We call this our church home and gather with this part of God's family to remember that God's beloved children are everywhere, and many, many of them are also longing for a place to belong, a place to call home.

We look around us in this beautiful House of God, the place where the church called St. Anne's gathers, and we see the face of family, brothers and sisters in Christ.

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Annie Lamott shares a story her pastor told about her best friend. When she was seven, she got lost one day. "The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, "You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here."

Lamott continues, "And that is why I have stayed so close to [my church] – because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home."<sup>ii</sup>

Please pray with me this prayer written by Bishop Thomas Ken:

O God, make the door of this house wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship; narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride, and strife. Make its threshold smooth enough to be no stumbling block to children nor straying feet, but rugged and strong enough to turn back the tempter's power. God make the door of this house the gateway to thine eternal kingdom.

Amen.

— *Bishop Thomas Ken (1637-1711), inscribed on the door of St. Stephen's Wallbrook, London.*

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<sup>i</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (HarperOne, 2009), 12-13.

<sup>ii</sup> Annie Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (Pantheon, 1999).