

20th Sunday after Pentecost

"The Sanctuary of God"

Psalm 96

O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless God's name; tell of Yahweh's salvation from day to day. Declare God's glory among the nations, Her marvelous works among all the peoples. For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; God is to be revered above all gods.

For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts. Worship the Lord in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth. Say among the nations, 'The Lord is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity.' Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord; for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.

We miss being inside, worshipping in the sanctuary, especially on a cold, blustery morning like today.

Yet, we have not stopped worshipping in the sanctuary of the God. All the earth is God's sacred sanctuary, including this parking lot.

Those of you who have mentioned to me that you don't always need to be in the church's "sanctuary" to feel close to God, like when you are on a golf course, or out on a lake fishing, or sitting on your deck or in front of a fireplace, might be surprised to know that the Psalmist agrees with you.

"The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it" the Psalmist sings out, in Psalm 24. Then in Psalm 96, which we just read, the Psalmist sings out:

"Honor and majesty are before the Creator, the Heart of all hearts; strength and beauty are in God's sanctuary."

God's sanctuary is not limited to a space of worship inside a building. It is found wherever we find ourselves out in the world.

In Exodus 3, the great "I Am" says to Moses from the burning bush, take off your shoes for the ground that you are standing on is holy.

While I would not suggest on this chilly morning, we take off our shoes and socks and worship barefoot, I would invite us to consider the sacredness of the place where we are gathered, here in the parking lot or in the places you are watching via live-streaming.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, when people of faith found themselves in the surprising presence of the Divine, they would build an altar by stacking rocks where they discovered God.

In Genesis 28, Jacob finds himself in the middle of nowhere, has a dream of a ladder connecting earth to heaven, and then takes the stone he used as a pillow, to mark the place, saying: **“The Lord is in this place and I did not know it! How awesome is this place! It is the sanctuary of God.”**

This is what Barbara Brown Taylor was referring to when she said, **“Earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars.”**

She goes on to say: **“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. When people want to know more about God, the son of God tells them to pay attention to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, to women kneading bread and workers lining up for their pay. Whoever wrote this stuff believed that people could learn as much about the ways of God from paying attention to the world as they could from paying attention to scripture. What is true is what happens, even if what happens is not always right. People can learn as much about the ways of God from business deals gone bad or sparrows falling to the ground as they can from reciting the books of the Bible in order. They can learn as much from a love affair or a wildflower as they can from knowing the Ten Commandments by heart.”**

Mary Oliver, says in her poem, **“Instructions for living a life - Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.”**

That is what Jacob and so many others have done in and through the sacred faith stories we find in the Scriptures, as well as what others have done throughout human history. They paid attention, were astonished to discover the Sacred Presence in another person, place or experience and then tried to find the words to tell about it.

Beloved of God, I do not know when we will be able to safely gather back inside our worship space. But if we are simply waiting to gather there to worship God, we will be missing the Holy found out here in the global sanctuary of life - be it in this parking lot, or in our homes or in our work places or on a Zoom meeting or in virtual classroom, or out in nature, and yes, even on golf course.

To borrow a line from Shakespeare: “All the world is God’s sanctuary.” If we pay attention in our lives, we will be astonished by the sacred presence all around us and within us, and then tell about it.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book, "Leave Church: A Memoir of Faith" says: **"What if people were invited to come tell what they already know of God instead of to learn what they are supposed to believe? What if they were blessed for what they are doing in the world instead of chastened for not doing more at church? What if church felt more like a way station than a destination? What if the church's job were to move people out the door instead of trying to keep them in, by convincing them that God needed them more in the world than in the church?"**

And out in the world, in God's sanctuary, is where we are called to worship and serve others as the bearers of Christ's healing love and light. Amen.