

August 26, 2018
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43

God's Temple

When I was in high school my family became part of a mission congregation, a new Lutheran church trying to establish itself out where the suburbs of Minneapolis turned into cow pastures. At first we met in the pastor's basement. Then we gathered in the VFW hall, which had an old piano on which I plunked out the hymns. We were a humble group, and for several years the church's existence seemed iffy—until, as my parents told me (I'd by then gone to college and then moved out of state) the church broke ground, built a sanctuary. The tenuous assembly now had a structure, a place where people could gather for worship, and they did. It was like that church proved the adage of a baseball movie of that era, *Field of Dreams*, the adage being, "If you build it, they will come."

Not true, says a pastor whose blog¹ I read last week, a post entitled "How *Field of Dreams* Lied to Me About the Church." The post had a lot that struck home, and was entertaining, too. This pastor wrote, "Don't believe that ethereal whisper, 'If you build it...'" That's not how things are with church these days, he wrote. Instead of expanding education wings and adding fellowship halls, churches now struggle to simply maintain their facilities, crossing their fingers against deferred maintenance. Meanwhile, members don't just magically appear out of the rows of corn. The blog's author, who serves a Lutheran church in Ohio, wrote, "I'd even welcome the scandal ridden 1919 Chicago 'Black Sox' team. It's called hospitality, right?" He noted how, for churches, instead of people appearing like magic, many are disappearing—as also happens in *Field of Dreams* to the character played by James Earl Jones. The blog's author implored, "Don't go James! We need you to be the lector!"

To build or not to build...that is, the question of holy buildings has a much longer history than the past few decades, and it's never been a simple question. Some weeks ago in our first reading we heard how David wanted to build a place to worship God. Seems a pious urge, but God was offended at the suggestion. God said to David, "Are you the one to build me a house? I haven't needed a house up to this point, and you're not the one to build it for me!" Eventually, David's son Solomon builds a house for God, the Temple. In addition to wisdom it's one of the things Solomon is known for and it is an incredibly taxing venture—in all senses of the word—and it takes years. We skipped over all of that in our summer scriptural series, fast forwarding today to the dedication of the building, to a speech Solomon makes at the dedication, that's what the first reading was today. Most of the words in it are directed at God, so I suppose it could be described as a prayer, but like many orations at ribbon cuttings, it is a mixture of announcements, relief at completion, political posturing, and not a small amount of self-promotion. (If we're honest, many prayers are like that, too.)

And so it's all the more remarkable that in the midst of all that, in the middle of his dedication/admonition/humble-brag/prayer, Solomon admits defeat. Maybe this part wasn't on the teleprompter, maybe it wasn't part of Solomon's original speech, maybe it has only occurred to him just now, as he's standing there in front of the completed building, looking out at everyone, and he asks, with wonder, and no small amount of doubt, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth?" Feeling his way forward, with this newfound wisdom, Solomon continues, answering his own question: God cannot be contained in the highest heaven, let alone in a building—all of this echoing what God said to David, all those years ago. When Solomon asks, "Will God indeed dwell on earth?" it's almost as if he is saying, "What was I thinking, making this building?" And maybe also, "How am I going to cover the mortgage?" and "What about

¹ <https://lutheranfirescape.wordpress.com/2013/05/02/how-field-of-dreams-lied-to-me-about-the-church/>

when it needs repairs? What about when it crumbles?” As things do. Things fall apart. Property taxes rise. Kingdoms fall. Buildings are demolished. The Temple is destroyed, not once, but twice. First by the Babylonians in 587 BCE—a searing event in Israel’s history and identity—and then by the Romans just after the time of Jesus—another pivotal point in religious histories. Today there remains only a fragment of an outer wall, a western wall, the wailing wall.

It’s heart-wrenching when a place that held holy moments disappears. The church my mother grew up in, was married in, that we returned to every Thanksgiving, is now a Walgreens. Nothing against Walgreens, but it still feels sad, even though it was an imperfect church, even though, as we know, God will not be contained in a house—as the Old Testament affirms and as Jesus announces. Jesus says God’s true presence is found somewhere else. It’s hard to over-exaggerate how scandalous it is to say this, how scandalous the place that Jesus says God’s presence is. It’s a difficult teaching, which causes offense, as Jesus also caused offense when he said, “Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up.” Jesus said this in the Temple after overturning the tables of the moneychangers. People were aghast: destroy this holy place? But Jesus was talking about the temple of his body, the scripture tells us. It is not in a building God that chooses to dwell, it is in a body. In Jesus, God puts skin in the game. In Jesus, God becomes flesh, and dwells among us, because it’s not a building that needs saving, it’s us.

That God does this, saves us, coming among us in Jesus, changes our understanding of God, and of flesh, our flesh, our neighbor’s flesh—it’s not only Jesus whose body is a Temple. The apostle Paul talks about this in one of his blogs, Paul blogs about bodies to a church whose existence was iffy at best, a church having trouble with all kinds of questions. Paul writes to them: “Do you not know that your body is a Temple of the Holy Spirit?” The way you care—or do not care—for your body, what you do with your body, these are acts of worship—or not. So also, are how we treat other people’s bodies, especially bodies that are falling apart, especially bodies that belong to foreigners. (Care for foreigners is straight out of the Old Testament, see the end of the first reading today.) We care for stranger’s bodies, we care for broken bodies, for stricken, smitten and afflicted bodies, for abused bodies, for that is where God chooses to be. God, who will not be contained in a house, deigns to dwell there, here, among us. How fitting, then, to have bodies front and center in worship today, dancers moving, reminding us of God’s gracious moving, God’s love for, and presence in, flesh.

I could close this sermon as I have some Children’s sermons, by quoting verse one of *We Are the Church*: “A church is not a building, a church is not a steeple, a church is not a resting place, a church is a people,” but I want to take it one step farther, I want to finish this sermon on churches and building by mentioning the Ikea Effect. This effect happen, for example, and thus the name, when you put together furniture, especially when the directions include complicated pictograms and after you finally finish assembly you discover “extra” screws. The Ikea Effect happens when you make something, and what you make may not be perfect, but having a part in the making of it you value it all the more. The coffee table in my living room is like that, and is, in fact, from Ikea. When we moved into the parsonage four and a half years ago my brother Jeremy and my husband’s brother Jeremy, (yes, we both have brothers Jeremy) put that little coffee table together, (it took book of them), and they still congratulate each other on it when they’re together in that room.

That’s what happens with churches, that’s how churches are built. I am sure that is part of how I went from playing hymns in the VFW to standing here—and that is why we want you to be the lector. Not James Earl Jones, you. Or you could do any number of other things; there are all kinds of ways people here—that you can—put some skin in the game. What we make here is imperfect, but building it together we value it all the more—even more than that, building it together we learn that though we are imperfect, God values us all the more. It is not just a structure that is being built up, but we ourselves. The project of building a church is never completed, but we’re not here to dedicate a house, we are here to dedicate ourselves, to God.