

I think I've told you this joke before but Sam reminded me of it the other night and I wanted to share it again because it's not unrelated to this scripture for today. So there was this guy stranded on a deserted island for many years until he was finally happened upon by a passing ship. The crew on the ship came onto the island and were amazed by what the man had built for himself over the years on this island. And so they asked him about it.

“So what is that place?”

“That's my house”

“And that place over there?”

“That's my bathing area and latrine.”

“And this oval area over there?”

“That's a track that I would run around daily.”

“And this place?”

“My church”

“And that similar looking place over there?”

“Oh,” he said, “that's the church I used to belong to.”

The joke kind of highlights how truly human is our erecting of churches and temples and synagogues and other houses of God. We might like to believe that we are doing something particularly sacred and holy in building a church and keeping it and the institution going, but like anything else we build it is a very human project and is not about us building a place for God, but rather about us building a place where we can be intentional about remembering that God is in all our projects and buildings. And not only is God in it all but our egos and limited selves do a good amount of blocking of God in everything we do. So while we might argue about which church is truly a church of God and which church has got the truth and which doesn't and while we are probably going to see our church and not the church that we used to go to as better at getting the God thing right, it's good to remember that its all human flailing toward the divine whoever we are and wherever we are if we are flailing earnestly enough we are bound to get it right occasionally even if just by accident.

In our scripture this morning we are reminded that in the Christian tradition we really aren't supposed to limit God to our human buildings and institutional structures or

even to a particular place. The moment I love in this scripture is when Peter responds to Jesus' transfiguration in that bumbling human way that only Peter can do. If there's anyone who can attest to the fact that we come to God not by getting it right but by getting it wrong, it would be Peter. So they are having this incredible mystical experience of God on the mountain-top where Jesus suddenly glows with a heavenly light and two of the great fathers of their tradition appear beside Jesus – Moses, the receiver of the great revelation of the Torah and Elijah, the greatest prophet of all time. They are all three standing there talking to each other right in front of the disciples. And Peter, James and John are standing there awe-struck, swept up in the ecstasy of the moment until the idea pops into Peter's head – we should do something! And so he asks if maybe they should build 3 tents to commemorate this incredible moment. It's like if this happened today, Peter would have said to Jesus in the midst of this amazing moment “uh, do you mind if I record this on my video camera? It's right here in my bag. I mean, this is really a moment we might want to share with others and look back on.” And you can just imagine the radiant faces of Jesus, Elijah and Moses turning to Peter with an irritated look, rolling their eyes and thinking something like “Leave it to Peter!” But they don't have to say anything because God's apparently equally peeved by Peter's comment and a cloud comes over them and the voice of God says “Don't be a nitwit Peter.” OK, well he doesn't exactly say that but I can kind of hear that between the lines. What God does say is “This is my beloved son. Listen to him.”

Now this is significant that to the instinctual response that Peter has to build something to commemorate and establish a sacred moment for later religious observance and ritualizing, God says “you know what, just listen! This is a pretty important person to me and should be to you too. Just listen to him. Don't go building your human buildings and establishing your cultic practices. Don't start thinking about building a new temple and abandoning the temple you used to belong to! Just listen to this person, my beloved son, your teacher. Just listen!”

This is significant because for our sibling Abrahamic faiths, Judaism and Islam, it is different from what they hear in their moments of revelation. In the case of Judaism, their tradition tells them at various times that God insists that they build a place for Him, a tent or a tabernacle, an arc or a temple, as specific places where God would dwell in a

particularly present and powerful way. And in the Jewish people's conception of their relationship with God as we all know a place, a land, was critical for them; namely, the land of Israel. This is why it was a natural thing for the Jewish Peter to ask his Jewish Lord if he should maybe build a few tents here for them to dwell in and to commemorate the moment.

In the Islamic mindset, Allah God revealed to the Prophet Muhammed the particular significance of the Kaaba in Mecca, which is believed to be the tabernacle built by Abraham himself. And it is to this place that all Muslims turn and pray five times every day and it is to this place that Muslims make their pilgrimage known as the Hajj which is one of the 5 pillars of what it means to be Muslim in this world. And along with the sacred site of Mecca, there is Medina and the mosque there which is where the Prophet received the revelation of the Quran and then the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem as the third holiest site for Muslims. So in both Judaism and Islam place is central and critical to the relationship with God.

But Peter the founder of the church, the rock upon whom the church was built, ironically, in this moment in time that we read this morning tried to do just that – build something of a church, a sacred site from this revelatory moment, and God said “No, the only thing you need to do is to listen to him. That’s all you gotta do Peter ok?” And this moment along with other teachings of Jesus like his saying “the kingdom of God is not here or there, but the kingdom of God is within” and writings in the letter of Paul which speak of the church being the body of Christ and the followers of Christ being a holy temple in and of themselves, all of this has led us to a religion that does not hold a land or building particularly sacred but what is sacred is a spirit and a way, a process. Or to say it in another way, since what is sacred is not one place or another place, one land or another land, through the sacredness of presence and spirit and purpose or journey, everything, we claim, has the element of the sacred – Israel no more than Vermont, Jerusalem no more than Burlington, this building no more than the buildings of our homes or the Senior Center. In certain ways, the birth and growth of Christianity, which was originally known simply as The Way, was a blasting out of all the containers that were typical of religion, that in any way contained God. God was as much as anything revealed as love and self-giving in the world rather than a presence that needed land and a

place to be in. The *place* built for God was built by God and that was the human heart. The land of God was all the earth. That there was only one group of people in relationship with God, that there was only one building where God could be worshipped, that there was only one land where the people of God could dwell was all challenged and cracked wide open by these followers of the resurrected Christ whose command to them was to listen, to be attentive and to love; listen and look for the sacredness of everything and notice how love creates holiness wherever it is unleashed.

The 6 weeks of Lent leading up to Easter is an opportunity to take up a spiritual practice or discipline not for the purpose of making ourselves holy or giving up chocolate, for instance, as a punishment for not being holy enough. But rather the spiritual practices of Lent - the taking up of a regular prayer time, for instance, or letting go of something that we are unnecessarily attached to, or fasting in order to cultivate gratitude for all we have to eat that we can so often take for granted, - such practices are ways of getting in touch again, awakening to the sacred and holy that is present in all our lives if we but make the time and space to recognize it. Taking on a spiritual discipline during Lent is like trying to have fresh eyes and renewed ears and a more supple and responsive heart for the purpose of recognizing God's presence everywhere, even in the least likely of places, like even in the church we used to go to...