

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
August 23, 2009
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: A Sanctuary with Purpose:

1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10–11, 22–30, 41–43, Ephesians 6:10–20, John 6:56–69

God's creation has this need "place." We humans need to have "places" we can call home, school, work, church, cemeteries and historical sites. Dogs and cats have this drive to find their way to the place called home, even after years of being away. By memory, smell and maybe magnetic draw, Salmon swim and fight their way from the ocean back to the very stream bed in which they were hatched, to lay more eggs and then die. Birds fly their magic migration over thousands of miles back to their place of first nesting. Even after many years of being away, people of all ages come back to this sanctuary because they were baptized, confirmed or married here. So often they say it feels like home, a safe place to be—which is one meaning of the word, sanctuary. Many of these people will ask about members they knew from that period of time. Apparently, the fellowship that was shared in this sanctuary also made it feel like home. They are delighted when they find out that former pastors still attend here because they were so often a part of the baptisms, confirmations or marriages that occurred in this sanctuary. I suspect that God built into his creation the need for place, regardless of what we call it.

So it is no surprise then, that around 966 B.C., God authorized King Solomon to build a permanent sanctuary for the people of Israel. For approximately a thousand years, the Hebrew's place of the worship of Yahweh had been anything from a pile of stones to a tent. Now that they were a nation, a very powerful one at that, a place they could call the worship home; a place where the Ark of the Covenant could be kept; and a place they could come back to time after time to worship God was in order. So the temple in Jerusalem with its magnificent sanctuary was built and dedicated. Today's Old Testament Lesson shares a portion of the prayer Solomon made at the dedication service of that sanctuary.

Interestingly enough, our sanctuary is almost exactly the same size the sanctuary was in Jerusalem, but the decorative styles are very different. Styles aside, the purposes of that sanctuary in Israel and ours are the same. The sanctuary in Solomon's day was decorated with colors and sculptures, not just to be beautiful, but with the purpose of giving one the sense that God sat on the throne called the Ark of the Covenant reminding worshippers of God's Exodus rescue of his people and the Ten Commandments kept inside it. Carved winged creatures called cherubim sat around the Ark and the altar to give the sense that God was there, ready to be worshipped. The sanctuary gave them a feeling of refuge or safety with God.

Our sanctuary is also beautifully decorated with colors and symbols, not just to be attractive, but with the purposes of reminding us of whom God is, of what God does for us, and that God is present with us—ready to be worshipped. The cross, the communion table and the baptismal fount are the central symbols that tell the stories of God's redeeming relationship to us in Jesus Christ. Today, in this place, as we

baptized the two brothers, NICHOLAS GENE LUTZ AND SAMUAL JACOB DUBÈ, we were reminded of the Bible stories that tell us God loves us so much that he gave his only son to wash away our sins; to claim us as his own children; to seal us to him and to raise us from death just as Jesus was. From the ever present Bibles in this sanctuary we read in the Gospel lesson that Jesus is the Bread of Life, who speaks the words of eternal life. And, we heard him invite us to believe in him, eat of him as the Bread of Life, or in other words, have a personal relationship to him. These are just a few of the stories, symbols and instruments in this place, in this sanctuary, that help us worship God. This sanctuary and everything in it provides a refuge, or as some people call it, a home or safe haven where we can be with God. The sanctuary in Jerusalem and this one in Cheyenne have these purposes and more.

As important as a sanctuary is, a set place or sanctuary is not the only space wherein we can worship God. In his prayer, Solomon declared that a sanctuary's purpose was not to capture God, "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" Yes, God can be worshipped in any place at anytime, yet, we humans still need this place, this space, this refuge to sense God's presence and to focus on him.

A second purpose of a sanctuary in which we worship God is that it supplies a refuge for common fellowship with other people as we praise God in hymns and anthems, listen to sermons, take up offerings, and celebrate the sacraments. Over and over again in the Bible, God called groups of people together to worship and serve him. Yes, God called individuals to do certain things, but it was to serve others in the wider community. Our vision statement declares this dream of community, "Bringing People Together in Christ's Love." Jesus said it well in John, "For God so loved the 'World.'" Jesus called a community of twelve men to be his disciples and others were welcomed. Now this community idea may not always sit well with some independent individualistic Wyomingites. This story from the book, Stories for the Heart by Alice Gray speaks to this issue.

"A pastor went to see a man who didn't attend church very faithfully. The man was sitting before a fire, watching the warm glow of the coals. It was a cold winter day, but the coals were red hot, and the fire was warm. The pastor pleaded with the man to be more faithful in meeting with the people of God, but the man didn't seem to be getting the message."

"So the pastor took the tongs beside the fireplace, pulled open the screen, and reached in and began to separate all the coals. When none of the coals was touching the others, he stood and watched in silence. In a matter of moments, they were all cold.... The man got the message." (John MacArthur).

When we baptized Nicolas and Samual, we did it as a community. As a community of faith, we vowed to guide and nurture them to follow Jesus Christ and become a part of his community-the church. We, as a community, heard their parents, Andrew and Breanna vow to live and teach them the Christian faith. I pray Nicolas and Samual will get the message like the man did in the story. A second purpose of a sanctuary in which we worship God is that it supplies a refuge for common fellowship or community with other people to worship God.

A third purpose of the sanctuary is to be a place where we are instructed in how to be God's people who are well prepared to live outside this place in the wider world. From his Roman jail cell, Paul told the Ephesians and us that it is a dangerous world out there. Paul knew this to be true for he was arrested for preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ. He warned us that there are powers and people who will try to steal us away from God. "Therefore (we are to) take up the whole armor of God, so that we may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm." We need to be armed with "truth, righteousness, be ready to proclaim the gospel of peace as we carry shield of faith, wear the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God and pray in the Spirit at all times."

As we gather each week in this sanctuary, this refuge, as the community of Jesus Christ, we need to teach or help put this armor of God on Nicholas, Samuel and all our children as well as ourselves. We have vowed to do this in our congregation's Brief Mission Statement and we even have said how we will do it. If you will turn in your bulletin to that mission statement and read it out loud with me.

"The Brief Mission Statement of the First Presbyterian Church of Cheyenne, WY"

By the grace of God, we the members of the First Presbyterian Church of Cheyenne, Wyoming, believe that the Bible is the written word of God, and we are committed to serving Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, and obeying his will. Our purpose is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, and to be alive with the joy and love of Jesus Christ our Lord through worship, fellowship, stewardship, education, evangelism, and mission. Our intent as a congregation is to: commit our individual gifts fully to his service; study to be disciples of God's word who can rightly teach his truth; provide programs of quality Christian education for all levels; share the good news with all who will listen, build and provide a strong commitment to local and worldwide missions; provide emotional and spiritual comfort and guidance to our congregation and the community through meaningful and relevant Christian worship; provide appropriate Christian counsel to individuals in need of emotional and spiritual support; and make Christ's love the hallmark of our relationship with each other and the community.

You have just participated in the third purpose of the sanctuary where we are instructed in how to be God's people who are well prepared to live outside this place in the wider world.

A fourth purpose of the sanctuary has been woven into today's scripture lessons, but is most clearly stated in Solomon's prayer. The foreigner, the outsider, and those who are different from us are to be readily welcomed into the sanctuary to join in the worship of the great, and mighty God of steadfast love, so that the word of God's love and salvation might spread throughout the world. If this sanctuary is to be a place of refuge, a center of worship, a community of faith in Jesus Christ and a place of instruction on how to live as God's people, then: We need to do our best to ensure everyone who comes here feels at home, senses God's presence, hears the good news of Jesus Christ and feels welcomed into this Christian community. We have the opportunity to do this as we host families from within the Cheyenne Interfaith Hospitality Network this week.

Let us turn now from these purposes of the sanctuary to a fifth one, praying to God and listening for his voice to give us refuge, instruction and encouragement in our faith in him. Let us pray....

We praise you Lord God for giving us the sense of place and a world in which we enjoy so many places. We are grateful for Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life who established the household of faith and invited us to be a part of it. We thank you for your Holy Spirit that persuades us to confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We are most appreciative for this sanctuary wherein we can gather as Christ's body to worship you and enjoy the fellowship of one another. We give thanks for our church family who surround us with nurturing love to help us grow in faith in you. "In them we see your Spirit of counsel and might. They stand beside us to encourage us when we are doubtful. They go before us to mark a trail we can follow. They stand behind us to push when we are indecisive, and they hold us up when we are weighed down with trouble." We pray that you help us to share such gifts of grace with our fellow humans outside these walls so that they will see Jesus Christ in us and come to know that they have an eternal place with you. We pray you will soon bring your peace, justice, safety and sense of refuge to those in the midst of war, poverty and despair. May the healing fellowship of your Spirit be upon all those who are ill. Take the hands of the students and teachers who begin school this week and carefully lead them through the crosswalks of knowledge to new places of wisdom. Help us to hear you voice as we each silently pray to you sharing our own joys and concerns... Gather us back together, Lord, as we pray as one the Lord's Prayer.....

Quote from When We Gather, Year B, pg. 222. James G. Kirk