

CHAPTER TEN

Space: Physical Space in Worship

EXERCISE

Think of a time of closeness with the Lord when you experienced his presence and that experience changed you. These times are often called “mountaintop experiences.” Take a moment and write down a summary of that experience.

Introduction

The physical space in which we worship is important. We see this in the narrative of Scripture. We are material creatures and creation is our home. God created the material world and our life with him is lived in this world. And God gave us the vocation of caring for this material world in all its beauty and brokenness. The incarnation, God becoming a physical body, fully affirms the importance of the tangible stuff that makes up our world and us. Now Jesus reigns, the resurrected Lord, body intact, at the right hand of the Father, and he is coming back to renew and restore this world and make a material new heavens and new earth in which we will live for eternity. In this chapter we will see how our physical worship space should be important to us because it is important to God. The book of Exodus will shape our discussion.

Discussion

The Mountaintop and the Sanctuary

There are expressive and formative aspects to our physical worship space just as there are for liturgy and music. We meet God in expressive ways when we have meaningful and emotional encounters. Those moments can take place anywhere God chooses: on a mission trip, in quiet meditation with God, or in our worship spaces on Sunday.

1. Encountering God on the Mountaintop

We can tend to think of encountering God in terms of those times when we feel the presence of God in tangible and deep ways. These can be very important and pivotal times in our spiritual lives.

ILLUSTRATION

In Exodus 24:15-18 we see the original mountaintop experience: *Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.*

The Holy Spirit came down on the mountain as fog and fire. Moses didn't plan this mountaintop spiritual experience with the Lord, but it clearly changed him. When he came down from the mountain his face shone because he had been in the Lord's presence. This story shows that having mountaintop experiences with the Lord—knowing him and communing with him one on one—is a good thing.

2. Encountering God in the Sanctuary

But between these mountaintop experiences are all the days, weeks, and months that make up our lives with God. These day-to-day experiences are also very important for our spiritual lives and for shaping us into God's people. So that is why God has taught us to order our worship spaces to be places where God's people can meet him in more formative ways.

ILLUSTRATION

As Moses came down the mountain, God gave him a prescription for how that mountaintop experience could be woven into the everyday life of the Israelites: *And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern*

of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it. (Exodus 25:8) God then spends the next seven chapters of Exodus going into every beautiful detail of how this tabernacle should look.

God is saying, “You are not going to come up here on the mountain with me every single day, but we will bring this experience into your daily life. I will pour out my power and glory and holiness into the everyday life of my people and it will take place in the tabernacle.”

The Inbreaking of God’s Holiness into Our Lives

The instructions that God gave for the tabernacle tell us a story about who he is. They tell of God’s holiness, how it should permeate and center the lives of his people, and how it can break into our everyday lives and our world of sin and chaos.

ILLUSTRATION

The tabernacle was the center of the corporate life of God’s people. In Exodus 25-31 we read that at the very center of the tabernacle was the Holy of Holies that the high priest could go into only once a year. Further out was the holy place that only priests could enter. Outside of that were courts where the sacrifices were made. Then surrounding all of this was the rest of the world. The tabernacle showed God’s people that in a world of disorder and chaos due to sin, God had an invasion strategy. It was a visual depiction of God’s glory coming to dwell with them.

I was invited to the Ukraine to help with the worship service of a church that God had raised up in the midst of the worst prison in that country. Many prisoners, along with the warden, had come to Christ, so they had built a church in the middle of the prisoners’ exercise yard and were training elders and deacons and trying to think through how worship should look in this place. I was led into the heart of this maximum-security prison, through a maze of tunnels and locked gates, until I emerged outside where hundreds of prisoners were in tent-like cells lining the walls of the exercise yard in a long corridor. Guards walked on either side of me down the corridor as prisoners actually banged on their bars with their cups. Then I saw a brick and adobe structure right in the middle of the yard. I heard big booming bass and tenor voices singing a

capella, “How Great Thou Art” in Russian. Here, in the midst of a place where everything was so obviously stained by sin and out of order, was a beachhead of holiness—a little church where God’s presence was making all things new.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

What story does our worship space tell about what God is doing in worship?

The Outpouring of God’s Holiness into the World

The word “holy” simply means “set apart.” God describes his people as holy, not because they are better than their neighbors, but because he set them apart for a special purpose, and part of that purpose is to make his glory known to the rest of the world. So the story of the tabernacle is also the story of God’s holiness pouring out from this place into the world and bearing fruit.

ILLUSTRATION

In Exodus 25:31-40 God spends ten verses describing in great detail the lampstand that would be in the center of the holy place and provide light. It was to look like a verdant, full, flowering almond tree. In the midst of God’s holy place there was a fruitful tree holding up a light in the darkness.

God has given us these light and tree images threaded throughout the Scriptures. In Genesis 1, when there was darkness over the face of the world, God said, “Let there be light.” At the end of the world, God says there will be no darkness; there will only be light and that light will be him (Revelation 21:23-27). In the same way, at the beginning of the world, God made a tree in the center of the Garden of Eden. At the end of the world, God says he will make a new heaven and a new earth. In the center will be a new city and in the center of the city will be a tree (Revelation 22:1-5). So our world began in a garden of light surrounding a tree and it will end in a city of light surrounding a tree. God gave his people these tangible images to gather around in order that these eternal realities might permeate and reorient their lives. This tells us a couple of things about us as the Church in a dark and dead world.

First, it tells us that we are to be light in the darkness. God tells his people, "I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." (Isaiah 42:6-7). God makes us a light for the sake of the people in darkness around us. We get to take part in the redemption of the world and everyone and everything in it.

It also tells us that holiness is a kind of fruitfulness. In Psalm 92:12-15 David says that *the righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of our God.* [God's people would be imagining the courts of the tabernacle when they heard "courts."] *They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green, to declare that the LORD is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.* This true picture of holiness shows us that it is rich and beautiful and life giving—to us and to those in the world around us.

Let's go back to that church in the Ukraine. As the doors to the church opened, I stepped into a place of beauty and order lit by candlelight. There was light in this dark place. The warden explained that the little church in the middle of the prison was not just an institution with closed doors that took care of its own; they regularly had visitors. They had a greeting team and a visitors' section for others from the prison. The church's physical presence permeated and centered the life of the prison.

We live in a world that is disordered and filled with all kinds of pain. But on Sunday morning when we come together, our worship is an outpouring of holiness into the world.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

In what ways is the worship of our church a source of light and life to our community?

Lesson

Christian worship is the place for the inbreaking of God's holiness into our lives and the outpouring of God's holiness into the world. (Psalm 63:1-8)

Our worship space, both inside and outside, tells us a story about God and his people. The way we order our worship spaces should tell us what God is doing during worship. The communion table tells the story that God intends to feed his people. The pulpit tells the story that God speaks to us in his Word. The baptismal font tells the story that God is washing us and making all things new. The way we use light and shadow tells the story of God bringing the light of his salvation into the dark places of sin and injustice. The way we use beauty, artistry, mystery, and the design and craftsmanship of all of these elements tells the story of God's people being brought into God's work, both in the inbreaking of his holiness in worship and the outpouring of his holiness into the world.

Exercise

Think of a time of closeness with the Lord when you experienced his presence and that experience changed you. These times are often called “mountaintop experiences.” Take a moment and write down a summary of that experience.

Discussion Question

1. What story does our worship space tell about what God is doing in worship?
2. In what ways is the worship of our church a source of light and life to our community?

Lesson

Christian worship is the place for the inbreaking of God’s holiness into our lives and the outpouring of God’s holiness into the world. (Psalm 63:1-8)

What are obstacles in our path to applying this lesson?

Maker and Sustainer of all things,
Day and night are Yours. Heaven and earth declare Your glory. Deliver us from all worldly allegiances. For, though we are born slaves, we are bound for glory. May we long after holiness. Sanctify us in every place, in every office, in every action, in every condition of life. Help us to cultivate a disposition that renders every act a spiritual privilege, that we may find joy in Your glory and rest in holy living. Amen.