



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Elizabeth J. Edwards, Associate Minister

MAUNDY THURSDAY, APRIL 18, 2019

A Sense of Place

Exodus 12:1-14; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

I suspect many of you spent Monday afternoon, as I did, transfixed by the images of the fire at Notre Dame. With countless Parisians sending real-time photographs and videos over social media, and the 24-hour news channels providing continuous coverage, the entire world was able to watch in disbelief as this 850-year-old cathedral was engulfed in flames.

What also flooded my newsfeed on Monday and in the days that have followed, were pictures taken by friends and relatives from their trips to Notre Dame. It seemed for a while that everyone I knew, except me, had visited at some point, and all were eager to share their photographs and memories. Even many who had never been, expressed grief and shock over what we witnessed, as this place of worship and history, which housed great works of art and magnificent feats of craftsmanship and which had withstood the abuses of war and pestilence for centuries, came crashing down before our eyes. And since then, there have been no shortage of reflections about the symbolism and significance that an iconic house of worship should be destroyed during Holy Week, no lack of discussion about if and how it should be rebuilt, and, unfortunately, no deficiency of naysayers, conspiracy theorists, and carpers ready to criticize.

But on Monday, as I watched the spire topple and felt the grip of sadness and disbelief, I started to wonder why I was having such a visceral reaction. I have never been to Paris and have no particular connection to Notre Dame. Though I am a lover of music and art and am deeply devoted to and interested in worship and church history, why, I wonder, would an event across the ocean, at a place I have never seen, stir in me so much thought and emotion?

Later in the week, as I read a debate over whether and how money should be raised to rebuild Notre Dame, some ideas about these wonderings started to percolate. As you can imagine, there were vocal proponents of doing whatever necessary to restore the cathedral; there were those saying that the Catholic Church should open its deep pockets to pay the bill; and

there were some well-intentioned comments encouraging readers instead to send donations to rebuild the Louisiana churches that were recently destroyed by an arsonist or suggesting that money would be better spent helping the poor. While I appreciate aspects of each of these arguments, still I find myself so saddened by the destruction of Notre Dame that NOT rebuilding seems unacceptable and unimaginable. But why? Why do I find myself so deeply affected by something that doesn't really affect me at all?

Throughout this Lenten season, we have focused on the external experiences that help us to encounter the divine more fully. We have waited for God in the stillness and silence; listened for God's voice in the sounds of worship and the songs of nature; looked for God in symbols and colors and art; and reached out to touch God in the person of Jesus. We have acknowledged and explored how the faith which fills our hearts and enlivens our spirits is nourished by the feast of sensory wonders God has created for our sustenance and enjoyment. The Creator of all we can experience or imagine has chosen to speak to us through beauty and to be revealed through the created world.

In truth, God is revealed to us in these ways because God created us—wired us, if you will—to experience the holy in these ways. The mysteries of God which our minds cannot comprehend and our knowledge cannot explain, we can somehow begin to experience through means that transcend our abilities to understand. Through art and poetry, music and architecture, we are invited to become co-creators with God, participating in the divine work of bringing beauty to the world. By the sea or the mountains, in intricacies of a blooming flower or the rhythms of our own heartbeat, we are reminded that there is so much beyond our control or analysis, humbling us to receive with gratitude all for which we are dependent on God.

This is the very essence of the incarnation, in fact, why "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." We humans had tried and failed repeatedly to maintain relationship with God through the Law and prophetic warnings. God is Spirit, but we are not, at least not entirely. Instead, we are this mysterious, astounding, intricate tapestry of heart, soul, mind, and body with which we are called to love our Creator and one another completely, and with each part dependent upon and defined by all the others. In Jesus, God became one of us, taking on heart, soul, mind, and body, in order to share life with us and to give us a living, breathing embodiment of God's love and grace.

Though we, and not the buildings we occupy, are the Church and our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, because we are embodied, we need physical, tangible reminders of the divine. We need sacred spaces where we

can step away from the rush and distractions of the world so that we can be more attentive to our inner lives. We need sight, sound, and silence in order to experience the presence of God, who is always moving and working among us but who is not always perceptible to us because of our inherent limitations or our own inattention.

You may be wondering by now what in the world all of this has to do with my initial question about why I and countless others have been so deeply affected by the destruction of Notre Dame. Perhaps it is because of this need God has placed within us to experience physical manifestations of God that we find ourselves longing for a more palpable encounter with the holy and a more tangible sense of sacred place.

We exist in a culture, and increasingly in a world, where it seems all is measured and quantified, where the value of everything is determined by its cost and of everyone by his or her usefulness or productivity. We want to be able to dissect and analyze, and thereby control, every part of life. At the same time, many of us find ourselves more mobile and less rooted in a community where we can discover an identity and nurture a sense of place. Rarely do we live in a house built by our grandparents or work the land passed down from our ancestors. Most of us cannot identify the countries and cultures of our origins, know the geography which shaped our heritage, or trace generations of our family roots to a particular location.

At least in part because of these shifting norms and cultural characteristics, we have become a people with what seems like unlimited potential for growth but who lack the roots to provide stability and nurture. We have the whole world at our fingertips, but we are never content. We are surrounded by people but lack community. Our lives are filled with every activity and opportunity imaginable, but we are empty. Perhaps it is, then, in a culture which prides itself on innovation and technology, on speed and efficiency in all things, that what we truly long for is to be grounded in places of meaning and purpose and to be captivated by things of beauty and mystery whose value far exceeds their price tag. Perhaps we were grief stricken by the images of flames engulfing a grand cathedral which is over eight centuries old and over 4,000 miles away because it represents for us an experience of the sacred and a sense of place for which our spirits long.

We often say that the church is not the building. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the church is more than the building. No, the church is not the wood and stone with which we construct places of worship, whether majestic cathedrals or simple clapboard chapels. But the church is, at least in part, the joys and sorrows experienced, the prayers and praise lifted, and

the fellowship and service shared by a particular people in a particular place. It is not that this plot of ground or the structures erected on it are inherently more holy than any other, but it is in the warmth of community, the expressions of beauty, and the witness of the faithful saints who have gone before us where we find our sense of place, where we plant and water seeds of faith and discover purpose in our shared identity as brothers and sisters in Christ.

I believe, this is why Jesus, on his last night with his disciples, left us with tangible symbols of who he is and why he came to live among us. We are a forgetful and distracted people, and we need reminders of his life, death, and resurrection. We need to hear the sounds and feel the touch of Jesus washing the disciples' feet as a reminder of his radical example of hospitality and humility which we are to follow. We need to see and taste and smell the bread broken and the wine poured as a reminder of the sacrifice Jesus was willing to offer for us and for all the world. It was in the ritual of the Passover meal that our ancestors in the faith were commanded to memorialize God's saving acts and to root their identity as God's people. And it is in a similar meal, shared around Christ's table, where we remember the redemption God offers in Christ and find our identity as Christ's followers. At this table and among this church family, indeed within the Body of Christ in all times and places, we find our identity, our belonging, our sense of place.

I believe the world has been heartsick over the fire at Notre Dame and that the cathedral will be restored because, whether we fully understand all that was contained in her walls or can comprehend all that was lost on Monday, we have a shared sense of needing sacred places like it, places which cause our hearts to soar and our souls to touch the face of God. The witness of our faith, especially on this holy night, is that even from the rubble and ashes, our spirits long to rebuild and restore because we were created by a God of renewal and restoration. Perhaps it is that longing for something beyond ourselves, for things of beauty and meaning beyond their measurable value, and for experiences of the mystery of the divine, which is the essence of the image of God in us—the *imago dei* present within us from our creation.

For the story of this night is, in fact, the witness of our faith in Christ: that from ashes God can bring hope and renewal and that from crushed fruit and broken bread, our souls are nourished. The bold promise of our faith which we have received by God's grace is that even from death, God will restore us to life, and even from hopelessness and despair will shine a light that no darkness can ever overcome. Thanks be to God!

Prayer

Maundy Thursday, April 18, 2019

Holy God,
walk with us down this long road to the cross.
Walk with us through the somber celebration around this table
and the shock of the betrayal and the loneliness of Gethsemane.
Walk with us through that impossible death on the cross
and the hurried burial of the One
who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.
Walk with us through dark days of disappointment and uncertainty.
Then lead us, Merciful God, whose way always points toward life,
lead us, we pray, to the promise of resurrection.
O Holy Spirit, walk with us this sacred hour,
and give us the strength to follow after the Christ,
in whose name we pray. Amen.

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