

Space Matters

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Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:14-21

One of my favorite musicals is *Rent*, which opens with an empty stage and the actors singing “Seasons of Love,” which asks “how do you measure a life?” On Thursday, I sat in the back of the empty sanctuary waiting for the piano movers to arrive. Being a sentimental person I began to think over my time in this space — Thursday also marked T minus one month until our last Sunday. I began to do the “how do you measure” for my service here. Three Messiah sing-alongs. Four Requiems. Five Christmas Eve services of lessons and carols. Fifty-one sermons. I don’t want to try to count how many hymns.

There was one other time I sat alone in the sanctuary like that, thinking about this space — it was within a couple weeks of our arrival here. It was before I had become a part of the wall’s memory, and before this church had become such a part of me. But even then I could imagine the history; the countless worship services that had permeated the brick and wood. The weddings. The funerals. The sound of singing, preaching, praying and responding. Many of you could share countless stories of what this space has meant for you. It is saturated with memory. It is our home. Sometimes I wonder if “spirit” and “memory” are pretty much the same thing — and if sensing the spirit of a space is the same thing as recognizing the memory it holds.

It is surreal for me that this is my last Sunday in this sanctuary. I’ll be with you four more Sundays, but we will be in another space. And this is your last Sunday in this

space as we have known it for so long. The changes to the sanctuary will be relatively modest, but they will be changes none the less. When you return it will not quite be the space you remember. New spirit and new memory will continue to fill this space.

When Israel was wandering in the desert, they kept forgetting. Their stories were disembodied from the homes and places they knew. They did not have the daily reminders of their servitude in Egypt in the form of pyramids and monuments to Pharaohs. They could not drink from the Nile which they had seen running red. The sea that had split open before them was a distant memory. These things served as icons of God's relationship with the Hebrew people — constant reminders of who they were, where they had been and what God had done for them. In the desert they were detached from the spaces that formed their narrative. Without narrative, memory fades. Without memory, identity fades. Space matters because it holds our stories, and our stories form us.

But what God teaches Israel in the desert — and it is a lesson they never fully learned — is that God is present in all spaces and all places. This is a God who could live in a tent, without the need for a massive temple. God also used the Exodus to form a new type of narrative — that of journey. The story of the Exodus still shapes Jewish and Christian identity to this day. God gave Israel sign-posts along the way — including, oddly enough, this bronze snake on a pole. This icon became the centerpiece of a new narrative of God's saving work. The community, in this case, did not need the security and formation of four solid walls to preserve it, but rather it needed something at its center — a shared experience and memory, a shared narrative, a shared encounter with God. In a very literal sense the snake raised on a pole re-formed the community as

people gathered to it. The community became a centered-set rather than a bounded-set, and it was centered on an icon that reminded them of God's saving work.

When Jesus formed his community, he did not do so by erecting a new temple or building a church — he did it by gathering people together around a new narrative of God's salvation for the world. He offered a narrative of light and life, and as John dramatically described it, he was raised up just as the bronze snake was. Jesus becomes the center of our life together, the root of our stories, the foundation of our memories. Wherever we journey, when we center on Jesus our narrative remains secure. A certain place can be for us an icon of that journey — four walls can sustain our spirit-memory — but those walls cannot contain who Jesus calls us to be. The ultimate icon of our community is the journey we share together. In fact we can serve as icons for one another as we hear each other's stories and watch each other grow.

How will our time of worshipping at University Park Church of the Brethren stretch and shape us? Can we retain our sense of community when we are outside of these four walls? I pray for you that this exodus will serve as a time for remembering and imagining again what God calls you to be, and I pray that through this experience you will find once again that the "journey is our home."