

Location, Location, Location
 Psalm 84 and 1 Kings 8:1,6,10-11,22-30,41-43
 Pentecost 14B

You all know the punchline to the joke: “What are the three most important considerations in purchasing real estate?” “Location, location, location!”

No one is exactly sure who said it first, but the earliest known reference to the triple “location” phrase in print is from a classified ad in the Chicago Tribune in 1926. One phrasal etymologist (persons who research the history of such things) suggests the context of the 1926 real estate ad implies it was an already familiar saying. So it’s long been known the prominent importance of place in selecting property.

Certainly, we can all agree: location is definitely key in selecting a home. However, we might not all agree on what defines the perfect location. Some folks prefer a quiet and serene rural setting, some look for friendly and tree-lined neighborhood dwellings, some seek the energy and excitement of an urban home. Some look for a good school district; some might seek nearby shopping or other attractions; others might prefer an idyllic view. Homebuyers all agree location is important, but their interpretation of what that means can vary wildly.

In our scripture passage from 1 Kings this morning, King Solomon certainly thinks he has built the perfect temple for the purpose of housing God’s presence. And it is in a perfect location.

Today we are unsure exactly where Solomon’s temple was – in part due to the fact it was destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar II some 400+ years after it was built (the exact date is debated).

Also, “because of the religious sensitivities involved, and the politically volatile situation in Jerusalem, only limited archaeological surveys of the Temple Mount have been conducted. No archaeological excavations have been allowed on the Temple Mount during modern times. Therefore, there are very few pieces of archaeological evidence for the existence of Solomon’s Temple.” (Wikipedia)

Speculation is that the temple was situated upon a hill overlooking the city of Jerusalem. Some experts believe it was built on the former site of a Jebusite shrine, which Solomon chose in an attempt to unify the Jebusites and the Israelites.

No doubt this was the perfect location for God’s house.

Our selected verses from 1 Kings looks like one that the creators of the lectionary placed on the cutting board and chopped down to a more palatable size. As Rev. Jeff Nelson, pastor of Grace United Church of Christ in Uniontown, OH says, whenever this happens “either for purposes of brevity, exegetical or theological bias, or outright embarrassment...it is important to consider what has been left out, as much as what has been left in.”

The context of 1 Kings 8 is the dedication of the First Temple. Solomon offers a long prayer for the occasion – one that sounds as though it would echo the sentiments of a dedication of any worship space today. Then, as now, congregations hope that their buildings may serve as sacred spaces where faithful disciples meet for study, service, worship, and fellowship, where new folks are welcomed, and where the community finds solace. These themes can also be found in Solomon’s prayer of dedication.

Solomon also prays for prosperity for himself and those who rule after him. Isn't it true that we also hope for success for ourselves, and for future generations that follow us? We want the special structure that we have erected to stand for all eternity, and we want it to be "successful" for generations to come. Solomon hopes for the same.

However, Solomon, known for his wisdom, acknowledges in verse 27 that "even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" "This king...can't help himself in fessing up that any building set aside for the worship of God couldn't possibly contain a presence so infinite and so beyond human understanding. To think that God only dwells in such places would shortchange God's nature, as well as leave God out of a lot of other spaces and situations that God very much would be concerned with." (Nelson)

In addition, in verse 41, it should be noted that Solomon offers a special prayer on behalf of "foreigners" who pray toward this temple, and the God it houses: any "who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land." Solomon realizes that no one should be excluded from the opportunity to worship God. This, indeed is "the intention repeated since God first called Abraham to be a blessing and beacon to all nations, rather than just those of any particular physical or spiritual boundary." (Nelson)

It is easy to draw some parallels between Solomon's prayer for the temple and what we hope for our own worship space. Here we have this beautiful building sitting amidst these tranquil grounds. The construction undertaking for this glorious building was well-planned and executed, and took a number of years and a whole lot of dollars.

We view it as a sacred space where one can encounter God's presence – God's spirit. It is a special place in each of our hearts and in our spiritual journeys, so naturally we feel there is no other space like it.

We wish our spiritual home were the spiritual home of our neighbors – that others would know of its superiority to other locations, and we communicate in every way possible to this community that all are welcome here.

But if we are honest, we must admit, as Solomon did, that this space – even with its sanctuary of massive volume, huge sloping ceiling, and tall spire that can be seen for miles in the distance – even with its almost 14 acres of woods, magnolias, parking lot rooms, arborvitae, allees, and St. John's Wort – even with names like Saarinen, Kiley, Girard, and Holtkamp associated with it – this beautiful, sacred space cannot (and should not) be the exclusive home of God.

God cannot be contained to a solitary location – no matter our best intentions to do so. Despite cost, size, and time spent in construction...God did not only reside in Solomon's temple, and God does not only reside in North Christian Church.

As Rev. Nelson says we should be reminded to keep the walls of our sacred spaces "permeable:"

God's presence and concerns extend beyond the confines of the space and any attempts to restrict spiritual experiences to what happens inside or only to those of a certain identity would be foolish and against God's intentions for the world.

Our buildings can do a lot of good for those inside and outside its walls, so long as a congregation remembers that God moves in and out of its doors at will, rejoicing and suffering with people in the whole of their lives, and not just the few hours that they may spend in a particular place at particular times.

God’s beloved creation is too big, and its concerns too vast, for God to be confined within stained glass by a small grouping, professing themselves to be the most faithful. To think otherwise, as Solomon himself admits, would be absurd. It would be more worthwhile to meet God in these designated houses for a time, and then follow God out, to the many other places where God wishes to go.

And just as we cannot contain God to a single location, we cannot prevent God from entering other locations. Take for example the absurd notion that God is no longer allowed in schools, and that that is the cause for school shootings and other violence.

We do not have the power to place God anywhere. Do we really believe we have the power to remove God from anything or anywhere?

We have no control over the spaces God inhabits. So rather than think of “location, location, location” pinpointing one spot that is the perfect spot for God to reside, we need to think in terms of “Location. Location. Location.” God is everywhere! And there is no place God can’t reach!

Let us pray:

Living, loving God, thank you for meeting us here in this glorious worship space. We feel your presence and we feel connected to you here. But we realize that you are truly everywhere. Help us to follow you out of this space and into the many other spaces you wish to go and to be. Amen.