

"Finding Where You Belong"

Jeremiah 28:2-6; Psalm 84:1-8

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

April 19, 2015 – 3rd Sunday after Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

Some years back the Utne Reader had a lead article entitled, "The Ten Most Enlightened Towns in America." By enlightened they meant innovative and culturally advanced. They were cities with vitality and a high degree of civic participation. These were places where people got involved with each other and with consciously raising the quality of life there. In these cities there is a strong commitment to racial equality and an appreciation for diversity... in short, a good place to spend some time or to live.

When I first got the issue I went right to the article to see how Columbus fared. Alas, we weren't in the top ten. But then, there were a lot of other cities that weren't there either. This is a different kind of list. It uses different criteria to determine what makes a city livable. Miles of freeway, shopping, or corporate headquarters weren't factors as they are in other ratings of cities.

So here was their ranking. The number one most enlightened city is Ithaca, New York. It's home to Cornell University, Ithaca College, and (my favorite) the Finger Lakes School of Massage. This place in Upstate New York is where the magazine felt that the most creative things were happening.

They described Ithaca by saying: "What's stunning about the place is the sheer volume and quality of social innovation, pragmatic activism, spiritual seeking, open debate, and cultural fun that goes on here-- in an atmosphere of robust local pride." Then they then went on to tell about what led them to their conclusions.

Cities that numbered two through ten were Portland, OR; Durham, NC; Burlington, VT; Madison, WI; Arcata, CA; Portland, ME; Iowa City, IA; Providence, RI; and Chattanooga, TN. At the end of the main article they had a supplemental list which named the most enlightened town in all the states. So I thought that here's another chance for Columbus to shine. Disappointment again, as we were beaten out Athens, home to Ohio University.

Well, there's all kinds of things that make a place livable and enjoyable. What meets the needs of one person may not be the same as what appeals to another. Some places just have a way of feeling better to people. You can also say that about particular neighborhoods within cities.

Ideally we'd all live in our place of first choice, but that's not always practical or possible. Housing prices, proximity to job, nearness to families—these are all factors to take into consideration. So we make the best decision possible, because it's hard to live where we don't feel a sense of belonging.

Both our scriptures this morning likewise convey a strong sense of place. In this case, Jerusalem. And even more specifically, the temple in Jerusalem, that spot on earth most closely identified by the Hebrews with the dwelling place of God. Sacred land.

The reading from Jeremiah is from a collection of prophecies during a troubled period in the life of Judah. Here another prophet, Hananiah, spoke before the king and the people. He brought an optimistic word that envisioned a return of the temple vessels taken by Babylon in conquest. Indeed, he said, their very freedom would be soon restored. Many leaders were harkened to hear this prophesy, for they were advocating an alliance of Judah with other countries in order to fight for their independence.

Jeremiah agreed that would be nice, but it's not to be. In the passages which both precede and follow our selection, Jeremiah strongly maintains that Babylon has been sent as punishment to Judah. Babylon is an instrument to teach the people about the error of their ways. So, therefore, they may as well submit to foreign rule no matter how offensive it is. Babylon will get its own destruction in time; but, meanwhile, the punishment will run its course.

Do you see how important place is here? Not only Jerusalem, but the temple itself is a focal point. What happens in its spaces takes on added significance because of the esteem in which the temple is held, an esteem which is also realized in our psalm for today. This comes from a different time, but again the city being described is Jerusalem. The event is a pilgrimage to the temple.

As the long journey ends the pilgrims sing or recite this hymn which now becomes their experience, too. "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God."

The newly-arrived pilgrims look up and they see the birds that build their nests in the convenient rafters. Even this is a good sign, for as it says: "The sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God. Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise."

In a sense this place of serenity even radiates outward to those yet on their way. It's a long and arduous journey most of the pilgrims must make, but the psalm continues: "Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion." Zion, as you recall, is the name of the hill in Jerusalem on which the temple is built.

The psalm tells of how the land becomes increasingly more lush the nearer they get to their destination and says of the pilgrims as they approach: "They go from strength to strength ... " That is, they get stronger, with a new burst of energy, as they get close and perhaps see the outline of buildings on the horizon. Their happiness and their second wind is all based upon the thought that soon they will realize anew the strong presence of God.

A sense of place is strongly seen throughout the Bible. It's not only on Mt. Zion, though that is central, but is associated with other sites as well. There are many geographical spots which are holy and closely identified with God.

That's somewhat foreign to our thinking and experience. As Christians in 21st Century America, we don't generally have that same strong association of God with particular sites, at least nowhere near the intensity of those ancient Hebrews.

Now as you approached Highlands in your car this morning I'd be glad to hear that Psalm 84 came immediately to mind, that you saw the land becoming more fertile the closer you got to Smoky Row and Snouffer, that you were elated to arrive at the House of God. We could do without the sparrows in our rafters, however.

Yet, while we're not pilgrims on a journey to the temple, I would hope that when you turn into our driveway it brings a good feeling. This is not the revered sanctuary of old, but it is a place where most of us particularly feel God present. It is also a place where we experience love even as we show our caring for others.

You could rightly say that these things mark this as a sacred place. Not because of something intrinsic to this site, but that it has become sacred over the years. What mapmakers call 6909 Smoky Row is special to us because of years of faith invested here.

Most of us, when we walk through these doors, feel like we belong here. We may go to other sanctuaries, but likely won't feel what we feel here. This is special. This is different. This is where we belong. These are strong roots upon which we build a significant part of our lives.

Despite all the place-centered experiences we have of God, there is another awareness not linked to geography. It is an inner feeling and very personal.

In her book, *Little House on the Prairie*, Laura Ingalls Wilder tells how the pioneers of the plains would erect a church right after they built their houses. This, she says, not only gave them a sense of being settled, but gave them a central and visible place of hope. They needed that, she asserted, to cope with the vagaries of living in the wilderness.

Well, I think inside of us there's a vast wilderness, too. Sometimes it's abloom with flowers, but other times it feels like a dry and parched desert. Our journey through life is really more the story of our *inner* venture than moving from place to place in the physical world. There are landmarks the soul requires just as important as the landmarks that our eyes need in order to get us from here to there.

A sense of fulfillment, the feeling of serenity and peace, the point of equilibrium are all part of what goes on inside of us. We can live in the nicest state and the nicest city and the nicest home, but it can seem like anything but paradise unless we have inner contentment.

Our true temple is the place in our souls where God resides and where we center our lives. Finding where we belong is really as much a question of relationship as where we reside. Where we belong, where we find our home in this earthly journey, is in the midst of God's active presence. That home travels with us wherever our feet take us. That is the strong center out of which everything we are and do finds its deeper meaning. And nothing can replace that.

When we find where we belong, when we discover the true meaning in our lives, then we, too, can attest along with the psalmist who directed these words to God: "Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise."