

SACRED SPACE

May 2019

A church fire is a heart-rending event. Watching the flames bursting out of the great cathedral of Notre Dame of Paris or realizing that three African American churches near Opelousas, Louisiana were deliberately burned down was heartbreaking. When a church building burns, the soul of a people is seared. The loss is palpable because, for many people, these are sacred spaces.

Sacred space is that place where we encounter God. Often the experience is shared with other people over the boundaries of time. Sometimes the encounter is so intensely personal that words fail to describe it. When Jacob was fleeing from Esau, in the desert night he saw a vision of God promising that he would not be abandoned. When he awoke, he exclaimed, "Surely the Lord is in this place!" Exactly! An encounter with God is what creates a sacred space.

It is ironic, but I cannot return to two of the most sacred spaces of my youth: the sanctuary where I worshiped, sang in the choir, and first preached has become a gym; the little chapel where I experienced my call to ministry has been torn down. And yet, that sanctuary of my youth is still filled with the people who gave me a gift of love that made it possible for me to learn who God was in my young life - a sacred space to this day. That little chapel of my youth still speaks the voice of Christ who called me to ministry - a sacred space to this day.

And there are other sacred places for me: hiking in the Grand Canyon; hiking in the shadows of the Grand Teton Mountains; sitting under the canopy of a star studded heaven, filled with a glory that is visible in few places like it is in the wilderness of northern Maine; and many more - all of them sacred because I was in the Presence of the Creator, aware that, "Surely the Lord is in this place!" Our sacred spaces reflect who we are, and we are shaped by the character of the space.

Even fire cannot destroy our sacred spaces. That is because sacred spaces are not about a place. They are about the God we met there. I was devastated when I learned that the chapel where I had experienced my call was gone. That is, until I realized, since I couldn't go back, I had to move on. And that, as they say, made all the difference.

When a sacred space that has become a shrine is 'lost,' we are forced to ask: "Where do we go from here?" Rebuild the shrine? Maybe, as long as we are committed to worship the God whom we and so many others had met there. Move on? Of course: After World War II Coventry Cathedral in England built a magnificent new modern Cathedral alongside the fire-bombed ruins of their old cathedral, and created a ministry of peace and reconciliation with the church of the country that had done the bombing. Whatever we do, we are invited, in the face of loss, to discover that there is present, deep inside each of us, the image of God who calls us "Beloved!"

In truth no sacred space is ever lost. It is carried in the heart of the person who has experienced it. It is shared in story and song and transcending mystery. It endures for all time and eternity. Even from the ashes of fire there arises a renewed faith, an enduring hope, an eternal love.

Even in loss there is enduring grace.

We carry within us God's Sacred Space.