

Sermon for July 18, 2021
The House of God

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

Good Morning. My name is Sara Coles. Most of you know me as a parishioner here at St. John's. The first time I visited St. John's was in 2003. My husband Bob and I drove to Washington, CT from Washington, DC to attend the funeral of his aunt Betty. Some of you might have known her. The occasion was terribly sad, but the funeral was beautiful. The church was packed, there were moving eulogies from her friends and colleagues, beautiful singing by the choir, and it all took place in this lovely stone church, with its paintings and carvings. We didn't know it at the time, but a year later we made the decision to buy a house and move to Litchfield County. I kept thinking about St. John's. As soon as we moved here I began attending Sunday services, and I knew almost immediately that I had found my “church home” in this house of God.

I am not ordained clergy and I have never preached a sermon before a congregation before. I have spent the past 10 years studying religion. I call it my sabbatical decade. Despite my studies, I had not thought that I was being called to preach, so when Father Geoff encouraged me to take the Lay Preacher Training, and later when he asked me to preach today, I was both honored and terrified. Writing a sermon takes a tremendous amount of work, both in research and in discerning what the Holy Spirit is saying to me and wants me to share with you. Through this process I have gained tremendous respect and admiration for Father Geoff, and all the clergy and lay preachers who perform this task every single week.

Gradually over the years, through my love of this church and this congregation, I have participated in several ministries, and found my voice to speak before you today.

Two of today's readings, 2nd Samuel and the letter to the Ephesians talk about the house of God. In the first reading, we overhear a conversation between David and Nathan. All summer we have been hearing the whole amazing David story, which will continue for a few more weeks.

So what is David talking about, building a house for the Lord? The word "house" is mentioned 7 times in this reading. We had already learned from the book of Exodus how God gave detailed instructions to Moses for building an Ark, which was a wooden box that contained the two tablets of commandments, and a Tabernacle, which was an elaborate tent to house the Ark. The Hebrews carried the Tabernacle and Ark around with them during their many years of wandering.

Now David finally has a permanent home in Jerusalem, and is at peace with his enemies. So he figures, God deserves the same. "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." To me that seems a little arrogant. Well, that was David.

But Nathan has a dream in which God comes to him and says, "Forget what David says; I've got my own plan for him and his house. Not a brick-and-mortar—or cedar—house, but a dynastic house, with endless generations of descendants." Well, we know that David's legacy didn't last forever, but around 950 BC the Temple did get built by David's son Solomon, and remained God's house for a few hundred years until it was destroyed by the Babylonians around 600 BC, then was later rebuilt, and was destroyed a final time by the Romans in 70 AD. Today, all that is left of the Temple is the Western Wall, or Wailing Wall.

A few years before the Temple was demolished and the city of Jerusalem was destroyed, St. Paul—who was not only a Jew but a Pharisee, a member of the elite rabbinic class, was traveling all around the Mediterranean, preaching and converting people—mostly people he called "uncircumcised," that is non-

Jewish— to believe in Jesus Christ, and establishing churches all over the area. Like David, he also had a vision for the House of God. In this letter to the Christian community of Ephesus, he wrote that the church he was creating was the “household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”

He was talking metaphorically, not about a physical house or a church or a temple, but a community of believers. “...the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” The Church that Paul created was a network of people who followed The Way, the life and teachings of Jesus. God’s dwelling place was in the hearts and minds of the believers.

So what does that mean to us as a community of believers? For the past year and half we have stayed in our own houses because of the pandemic. For most of the time we lived apart, we worshipped apart, we did not come together or see each other except on Zoom.

And now that our lives are returning to something like what we remember as “normal,” we are gathering again, worshiping together in this place, this House of God. Is this God’s dwelling place? We keep the Sanctuary candle lit at all times to symbolize his eternal presence, which is a custom that actually began at the Temple in Jerusalem. But does God really live here? Does God live in any church or place of worship?

I say no. During the pandemic, when we prayed and worshiped apart in our houses, our cars, our separate places, God was there with each one of us. God’s home is in the heart and mind of each and every person. It is inside each one of us.

We can call this place a House of God, because we gather here to worship him together. We keep the Sanctuary candle lit to symbolize his eternal presence. But God does not live here. As he told Nathan in his dream, and later revealed to St. Paul, God does not need a physical home.

But **we** do. As Christians, our faith is exercised in community. We need each other to be a church. And we **do** need to maintain this beautiful building: we needed to replace the roof and the doors, we need to repair the crumbling mortar, to preserve the paintings and carvings, to polish the brass and iron the linens, to keep the organ tuned...**we** need this physical building in order for us to be together, in order to be a church. But more than any of that...we need each other. We learned that lesson during the long months of isolation and quarantine.

It was great to be able to watch the live stream of the weekly services (as many of you still do), and I thank Father Geoff and the quaranteam for that. But it wasn't the same as being here together, praying together, singing together, feeling each other's presence, and worshiping together in this space. As Joni Mitchell wrote in her song: "You don't know what you've got til it's gone."

In order for **us** to come together to be a church, we need not only a physical building. We call this building a "house of God," but it is really **OUR** house. We need to talk to each other, to listen to each other, to work with each other, to discern and offer our own particular gifts, to participate in the many ministries that are necessary to make up a church. Before, during, and after the pandemic, many people have been involved as readers, as singers, as Altar Guild, as VJ's, as hospitality ministers, as Vestry members, and in the community, in the outreach and food ministries. Now as much as ever, we need to continue that work, and reach out those members of our community who are not present with us. To get in touch with them, to let them know that we care about them, we miss them, that we want them to be part of our family, part of our community, part of our church.

We even need to step outside our comfort zones to do the things that God is calling us to do. Like preaching this sermon. Maybe some of you will be called to be lay preachers, as Laura will be doing next month. We each have different gifts to bring to the church.

I would ask each of you to look into your hearts, to discern your **own** gifts, to hear what God is calling you to do. **That** is how we are a church. **That** is how we build the House of God.

Amen.