



October 20, 2019

Sermon Series: **our** church. **our future.**

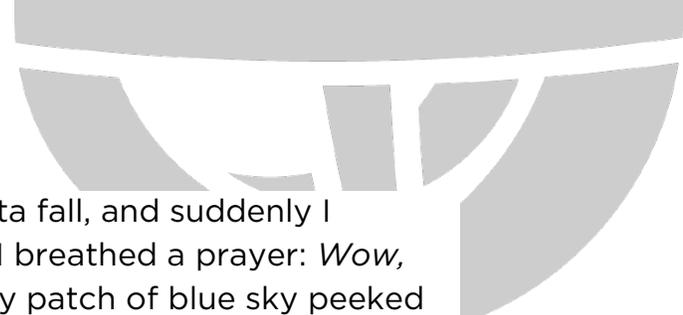
God Calls Us To Care for Our Sacred Space  
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

**Nehemiah 2:11-20 NRSV**

<sup>11</sup>So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. <sup>12</sup>Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode. <sup>13</sup>I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon's Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. <sup>14</sup>Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool; but there was no place for the animal I was riding to continue. <sup>15</sup>So I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. <sup>16</sup>The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work.

<sup>17</sup>Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burnt. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace." <sup>18</sup>I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us start building!" So they committed themselves to the common good. <sup>19</sup>But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us, saying, "What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" <sup>20</sup>Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem."

Yesterday morning I went golfing with Pastor Vern and my son Micah, who's home from Wartburg College for fall break. It was still dark when we headed over to Willinger's Golf Club outside of Northfield. The forecast promised sun, but when we teed off at 8:12 it was overcast and raining slightly. I found myself thinking wistfully of my nice warm bed. But once I got the kinks worked out of my swing and really looked up, I forget about the mist and the brisk morning air. It was spectacular: A gorgeous panorama of color in the trees. Beautifully tended emerald fairways. The occasional honk of a duck or a wild turkey breaking the heavy stillness. It



was everything that's glorious about a Minnesota fall, and suddenly I couldn't imagine wanting to be anywhere else. I breathed a prayer: *Wow, God! Nice work.* And almost in response, a teeny patch of blue sky peeked through the gray clouds. It felt like sacred space.

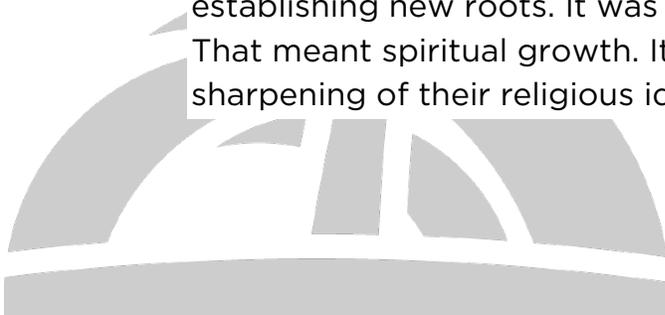
When is the last time you were in a space that felt sacred? A place where God felt close and your spirit was truly at peace. Maybe you were surrounded by family. Maybe it was outside amidst creation. Maybe it was in a church. Of course, God's presence can be found everywhere. But how often do you truly stop and name it and give thanks?

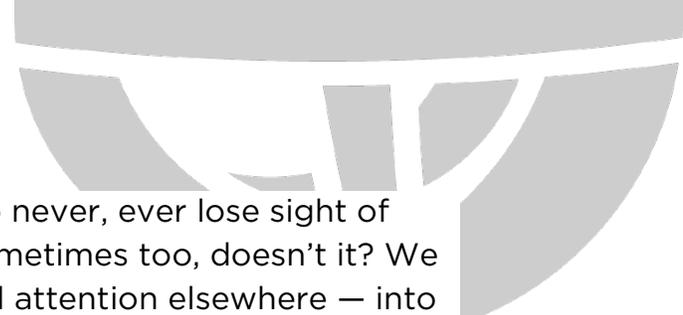
Patriarchs in the Old Testament seemed to have an acute sense of the importance of marking spaces as sacred. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob; Moses, Joshua, Gideon ... again and again we read that when someone had a particularly powerful encounter with the Lord, they'd stack up a few slabs of rock, anoint them with oil or consecrate them with prayer, and declare that it a holy place dedicated to God.

Few, if any, of those memorials exist anymore. But the stories were passed down from generation to generation until they became part of our scriptural narrative. Then and now, we need to hear of how and where God is present. We need to be reminded that in this spot, something bigger happens. God comes near and the distance between heaven and earth gets a little bit smaller.

One such story is part of our lesson today. Reading Nehemiah and its companion Ezra give us another example of how important it is for God's people to create and care for holy spaces. Ezra and Nehemiah were leaders after Israel returned from exile in Babylon. They were each instrumental in naming what set the people's relationship with God apart as holy. The people started by constructing a new Temple so God could dwell in their midst. Then, they turned back to the Torah as their primary guide for living. Finally, they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. Those walls provided protection for the people and reestablished the city's central place.

For Ezra and Nehemiah, it wasn't just about digging out of the rubble and establishing new roots. It was fundamentally about a recommitment to God. That meant spiritual growth. It meant a focus on scripture. It meant a sharpening of their religious identity. God's people learned a lot of hard





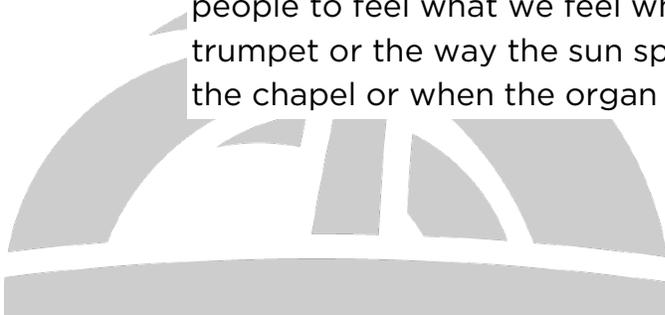
lessons in exile. One of the primary ones was to never, ever lose sight of who and whose you are. That happens to us sometimes too, doesn't it? We get distracted and busy, we put our energy and attention elsewhere — into work, or family, or hobbies. But God's people were determined to recommit their hearts and lives to the Lord. And so they put their best energy and resources into creating sacred spaces worthy of God.

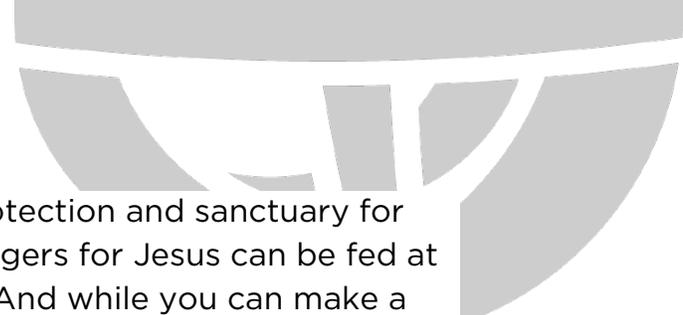
That effort is still just as important for us today. Why? Because our surroundings can deeply affect everything from our mood to our sense of safety to our connection to other people or the divine.

You hear that echoed in several of the main objectives of Zumbro's building project, specifically in how we will be enhancing worship and extending hospitality. We want our facility to be inviting and accessible. We want our sanctuary to inspire meaningful encounters with God through music, word, and sacraments.

I admit, this can be a little tricky. After all, we don't all agree on what makes for sacred space. Symbolism that might feel comforting to one person can be off-putting to another. A few weeks ago I was up at the College of St. Benedict for a conference for work. Zumbro member Sara Holmes is a sophomore at St. Ben's, so Sunday night we met for dinner. Our conversation turned to the building project. Sara confessed that she's a little hesitant about the changes being proposed, especially to the sanctuary. *The pictures are really nice, she said, but this is the only church I've ever known. It feels like home. I'm worried that when I come back it will be different.* This space is sacred for Sara; it's where she affirmed her faith at confirmation, and offered her gifts through liturgical dance, and sat with her family for countless worship services. She can't imagine it looking like anything other than it does right now. Still, when I texted Sara to see if she was ok with my sharing her story, she said "I do still believe that there are a love of important changes that need to be made in order to be welcome and accessible for all."

We care for our sacred spaces because they mean a lot to us. But we also do it because we want them to mean a lot to others too. We want other people to feel what we feel when our hearts are touched by a soaring trumpet or the way the sun sparkles through the rainbow stained glass in the chapel or when the organ swells on Easter morning during the





Hallelujah Chorus. We want to be a place of protection and sanctuary for our community, a place where anyone who hungers for Jesus can be fed at the table and told there's a place for you here. And while you can make a church anywhere, God has planted this church, in this place — with a commitment to care for the city and its people. As we look at the plans for Zumbro's building project, tending to the infrastructure might not seem that flashy. But you'd be surprised how many people are genuinely jazzed about taking care of the roof and HVAC system. They love this church. And they want it to be around for generations to come.

Perhaps that's the lesson from Nehemiah: that tending to those places that God feels closest to us is one way we show our love and devotion. If that's out on a beautiful golf course, then pick up trash and protect clean water sources and stop to give thanks for the sights and sounds of a glorious Minnesota fall. And if that's in a church building, then invest in the roof and regrade the foundation and refurbish the organ.

We hear this echoed in the hymn Bob Giere wrote for this campaign. In the third verse, we sing 'Let this place be a light, to hope and to feed.' That is what we do with our sacred space — here, Zumbro Lutheran Church, planted in downtown Rochester and rooted in Christ. That is why we exist, to invite a new generation of believers to put their trust in him.

Ultimately, friends, our most sacred space is the one we share with Christ. Our most sacred space is the faith that blossoms in our hearts as we receive Jesus' love and mercy. Care for that first. And God will always find a place with you. Amen.

