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## A Place To....

Deuteronomy 6:10-12a The Message When God, your God, ushers you into the land he promised through your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give you, you're going to walk into large, bustling cities you didn't build, well-furnished houses you didn't buy, come upon wells you didn't dig, vineyards and olive orchards you didn't plant. When you take it all in and settle down, pleased and content, make sure you don't forget how you got there-God brought you out of slavery in Egypt.

Many of you know of the late great Disciples preacher and storyteller Fred Craddock who died earlier this year. He had a profound influence on three generations of preachers and pastors. He often preached by telling a story and then teasing the implications out of the story, and letting his hearers come along with him until sometimes they were surprised at where the story led and what it disclosed about God. In one of his stories,<sup>1</sup> Dr. Craddock recalls that when he went to seminary he asked one of the rabbis on the faculty what the man's favorite name for God was. And the rabbi replied that among all the ancient Jewish names for God, his own favorite was **"the place."** **"The Place."** And although that startles our ears, it **is**, in fact, one way to translate the word "Yahweh." And while it may not be a very familiar translation, it is nonetheless perfectly appropriate. **"The Place."** Such a name for God recognizes that indeed places can be God-filled, holy. It reflects our human need to memorialize and honor places that are special. It is why we erect markers on graves and decorate them. It is why famous people have their birthplaces remembered with historical markers. It is

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<sup>1</sup>Fred B. Craddock, Craddock Stories, Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, eds. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), p. 86.

why as we recall this weekend both the terror and the extraordinary courage displayed fourteen years ago with achingly beautiful memorials to place on the tip of Manhattan and in Shansville, Pennsylvania. It is why we make scrapbooks and albums and fill them with pictures and documents and run our fingers over them as we remind ourselves of places in our lives that have indeed been momentous, full of meaning, sometimes even sacred indeed, suffused with God. "The Place."

Now, sometimes places seem holy, God-filled, because of their sheer awesome beauty. We in Colorado have so many such vistas before us whose sheer awesomeness defies words that we almost become jaded. The pink light of sunrise reflecting off of the Garden of the Gods and back out onto the endless prairie; the storm clouds that boil and bubble up amidst the foothills of the Front Range; the awesomeness of Pikes Peak in the fall after the season's first snowfall ices its summit like a craggy confection, the groves of Aspens in the autumn that sing their own beautiful song in the mountain breezes. "Awesome" is not too strong a word for any of these, is it?

But as awesome, as glorious, and wonder-filled as all of these are, they are not holy simply because they are awesome. For place -- no matter how spectacular, no matter how awesome -- without people is never quite as holy as place with people. Places truly begin to become Holy Places when they are **suffused** with **people**, God's people. And so it is for the ground upon which we stand and in this place in which we worship-- it is awesome of its own accord because God made it with its awesome view of that towering peak to our west -- and God is here. But it begins to become **Holy**

because a particular part of God's motley family – ***you and me and all the saints living and dead who crowd in around us*** have claimed this place as ***our*** place -- *our* place -- and have put sweat and tears and laughter and song and joy and fears and love into this place.

For look around you: Do you see the cornerstone from the 1894 building embedded in the narthex wall which silently testifies to the people who saved their pennies – literally – and made that former building possible from which the good news was shared with those early inhabitants of the Springs? When you walk on the tiles in the Information Desk area, do you remember all the people who bought and then signed the back of their tiles, with thankful inscriptions to parents, grandparents, forebears and hopeful testimonies to their children and grandchildren? Can you squint your eyes and look over here at the baptistry and see all the people, young and not-so-young, who responded to God's invitation to new life in its waters? Can you look upon this chancel and see the ashes and caskets of all the saints whose labors came to an earthly rest as we celebrated their lives? Oh, indeed, this place begins to become holy because crowded around us this and every day are the people who make us who we are, who give us life, who are our tether to the past.

But my friends, even an awesome place full of and suffused with the 137 years worth of people doesn't quite capture why, in the end, this has been indeed, a Holy Place in the fullest sense of the words. For people -- even the best people in the world - are not enough all by themselves to make a place Holy. The ancient Hebrew people discovered that too, time and time again. It is what our scripture for this morning is

talking about: not only does God rightly remind the Hebrew people on the verge of the promised land that they are not self-made and that all that they have and are a gift -- not something they earned or did for themselves -- but it also reminds them that the place to which they were going would only be a Holy Place in its fullest and deepest sense when they remembered that they were sent there by God with a mission, that their purpose was not just to enjoy their companionship with one another but to show to the whole world that God is a god of goodness and grace and mercy everlasting who cares about all creation and who hurts when anyone is hurting and who calls the people that call this place their place to make that God known far and wide.

Without such a sacred purpose, the Hebrew people would likely have been simply one more ancient tribe, one more footnote in the history books. But they were not, and we who are their spiritual descendants have not been just a footnote either because at our best we have allowed God to give our lives purpose, have responded to God's call to serve, as Jesus put it, the least of these, have seen hurt and pain in our part of the world and tried to bring hope and healing and light to those who live in darkness, who labor under the mistaken belief that God is a god just waiting to hurt and punish.

And so it has been and will be with us. This place is made holy because it is suffused with good people, past and present. But its deepest holiness comes because, indeed, we too have laid hold of the mission God has for us. And so we close our eyes and we see not just those baptized and those who have shared the communion table with us and those married and buried in and from this place, but we also see the volunteers who have worked this past week with IHN to help house homeless families.

We squint our eyes and we see a Navajo family whose lot in life is improved because we helped them to have water to drink and chickens to raise and warmer homes to live in. We look around us and we see the folks, past and present, who made many trips to New Orleans to help families who had lost everything know that they hadn't lost the care of their brothers and sisters even in faraway places. We close our eyes and smile as we bring to mind all those people who come joyfully to work hard at the Addie's Kitchen Freezer meals to raise money for youth and to help those in this community and beyond with food when they are hurting. You know that I often close my Offertory Prayers with the phrase "from our doorsteps to the ends of the earth," and as we imagine all those people working so hard to help others we realize that this place is in the very fullest sense holy because it is a community of people who want to be about mission, a people inspired, energized, impelled to make things better – even to the ends of the earth – in the name of a God of grace and love. **That**, is finally, why this place is Holy.

And so it is with us: as we begin another "program year," as we kick off our activities this day for the coming year, we know that we have been blessed and we **are** blessed with a beautiful place and treasured people, past and present, who have been a gift to us and who have helped make us who we are. But we have been, and will continue to be, a Holy People in a Holy Place because we respond with joy and generosity to the mission that God places before us. **That's** what makes for holiness, for continuing blessedness. As someone once put it, the church is the only institution in society that exists for the sake of the people who are not part of that institution. And

that is simply a less poetic way of saying what our scripture this morning says: “Do not forget the Lord.” Because it is God who calls us ever and always to stay awake nights thinking about how the resources of this place -- money, people, history, and our building -- can be used to help those who are hurting. It is God who reminds us when we need reminding, gently but firmly, that whatever differences or squabbles that we may have ought never divert us from how we can serve God’s purposes for good. It is God who delights not only in our companionship with one another and how much we mean to one another, but delights when one of the least of these in our community discovers that hope is real because of what we have done for them.

But there is also a danger for us as we seek to be that holy place and that holy people engaged in mission: that we will try to do too much. You may recall from my educational leave/sabbatical report in late March that virtually every person I consulted said that the biggest danger of a church of our size as we continue to grow is that we will become too unfocused and thus the effectiveness of our efforts could diminish. These folks recommend a very intentional effort to **focus** our work and mission and to accept and be at peace with the fact that we can’t do everything and that there will be opportunities that may come our way that we ought to say no to. As one of those sabbatical resource people put it “You ought not do everything that you can do; some opportunities are best left to others.” As you know, we’ve had a Vision Tune Up Team working hard this summer to “tune up” our now-eight-year-old Mission and Vision statement in order, in part, to help us focus our ministries given both our resources and our history and our particular understanding of the gospel. They will be sharing that report and “tune up” with the Elders and Board soon – and I am expecting that it will

indeed help us do even better what we have been doing that has made this place holy in the fullest sense of the word – serving God’s world and proclaiming a God of unconditional love for each and all, even as we get even better at focusing just how we do that.

My friends, we are blessed, we are blessed indeed: with an awesome place, with a great cloud of witnesses who have made us who we are, and with a mission and a purpose under God -- to reach out to those who are hurting, to make sure that the resources entrusted to us will make a difference, making sure that those resources are focused well and wisely as we continue to grow in faithfulness, in participants, in giving, and in mission. May everything we do help make it so, with the help of the God who has indeed blessed us in every way. Amen.