
Stairways to Heaven

Haggai 2.1-9, 1 Corinthians 3.9-17

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 4, 2007 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

There's a story about a little church in the Highlands of Scotland. A friend of mine told me he visited there once. When the worship service started there was a little procession, with a cross and a choir of half a dozen, and at the end the pastor accompanied by a dog. The pastor went up to the altar rail and tied up the dog there before beginning to lead the service. When my friend asked about this interesting liturgical move he was told that the previous pastor had got old and his sight had begun to fail so he had been led by a guide dog. That dog had died and been replaced by a new dog. Then the pastor died but the new guide dog still liked walking up the aisle, so when the new pastor came the deal was that even though it served no useful purpose, he was expected to take the dog with him in the procession. Even after the second guide dog died they got another dog so the procession would still be complete.

For many people, inside and outside the Church, that story sums up what they distrust in the fuss and bother of formal church liturgy. It sometimes looks like a whole lot of dressing up and prancing around for no useful purpose, quite possibly based on some kind of historical accident or misinterpretation. What I want to do today is to show how what we do together when we gather in this place each Sunday is in fact soaked in the imagery and imagination of the holy scriptures, and is our best effort as the people of God to embody in movement and gesture the way God comes among us.

I'm going to begin by talking about the significance of the city. Duke's campus, where tens of thousands come to work and study each day, is in many ways like a city. Durham, which embraces Duke's campus, undoubtedly is a city. The scriptures are rather ambivalent about the status of the city. The first city in the Bible is established by Cain, after he has killed his brother. Eleven chapters into the Bible we have Babel, the self-sufficient city that knows not its need of God. Abraham leaves the city of Ur to follow God's call and we all know that Sodom and Gomorrah are hardly the poster children for the city. It is building cities in Egypt that constitutes the Israelites' slavery. It's pretty much all bad news for the city until we get to the one city that becomes the desire of the nations: Jerusalem, the city of the living God. And then for the rest of the Bible we have this tension between the city of God, epitomized by Jerusalem, and the human city, epitomized by Babylon, the place of exile, the reincarnation of Babel, the prison into which the people of God are always likely to lapse if they insist on going their own way. The tension reaches a climax when Jesus, having been largely acclaimed in the countryside, culminating in Palm Sunday, is then rejected in the city by his very own people. The whole drama between Babylon and Jerusalem is played out again in the book of Revelation, and the finale is that a new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven, reaffirming the permanent place of the city in God's imagination, and the ultimate goodness of human daily life in the destiny of God.

In our worship we strive to represent this renewed Jerusalem. We worship not alone, but together, with friends and strangers, in sufficient numbers almost to constitute a city. In hymns and songs we strive to depict and embody the life of the new Jerusalem, finding our voice in the praise of God, joining our stumbling altos and baritones with the chorus of the heavenly choir. In our collection plate we try to bring the commerce of the city in harmony with the commerce of God. Yet we also recognize the failure and pain of the city. We make our confession together, recalling not just our petty, personal sins but our collective and corporate failures, and in the prayers of the people and the prayer of thanksgiving we bring before God the needs of our city and the burdens of its people, together with our gratitude for God's provision and constant care. Sunday morning really is about the transformation of Babylon into Jerusalem: it is about coming before God and beseeching him to turn the frayed and damaged fiber of our common life into a woven tapestry that reflects his glory.

But Sunday morning isn't just about seeking our renewal as the city of God. There is another tension that runs through the Bible, and it begins even earlier than the story of the city. It begins in the garden. The word paradise comes from a Persian word that means "walled garden." Besides the notion of heaven, the garden is the most significant image of human longing in the Bible. The Garden of Eden is a paradise of home and workplace, a harmonious ecology of human endeavor and divine abundance, both good for the practicalities of food and

pleasant to the aesthetics of sight. Added to that comes the intoxicating garden of the Song of Songs. Here is a garden where every fruit is luscious and brimming with *double entendre*, where fertility is blended with sensuality, where the dripping and oozing and gurgling of the garden are infused with the butterfly stomach, fluttering eyelashes and breaking smile of newly-declared love. You may know the story of the pastor who was walking back from church and saw a man digging his front yard. "Fine garden you have there, sir" said the pastor. "I've worked hard on it" replied the gardener. "It's God you should be thanking," said the pious pastor. The gardener responded, "You should've seen it when he had it to himself." The garden in the Old Testament is the perfect blend of God's provision and human work. It's not simply a natural thing that grows by itself, but a carefully nurtured result of planting and tending. And so there's a direct link between the labor of the garden and the toil of agriculture. Farming brings forth the fruit of the soil in a similar blend of divine provision and human response. But as in the story of the pastor and the gardener, both garden and agriculture can incline Israel to forget the God on whom it depends. Just as in the Garden of Eden, so later in the Garden of Gethsemane, a vital decision is made on which the destiny of creation rests. Gethsemane depicts the pollution of God's paradise through scarcity, fear and violence, as the betrayer Judas arrives with a band holding swords and clubs. Yet just three days later, in another garden, a man and a woman, not Adam and Eve but Jesus and Mary, restore the pristine glory of the garden and the promise of paradise.

A beautiful church building like Duke Chapel is like a walled garden. It is designed as a sanctuary in which people come together for an hour a week to experience humanity and God in perfect relationship. I've heard many people say that when they first walked into a Sunday morning service here they thought they'd died and gone to heaven. And of course the prominence of weddings in our tradition here emphasizes the themes derived from the Song of Songs. Our Sunday morning liturgy consciously strives to preserve that sense of sacredness and holy intimacy, a sense that here, if nowhere else, one can find harmony and beauty and a melody to lift one's own mundanity. When we share the peace together we express our longing for the peace of that walled garden. When we are silent together we listen to the soundless growing of God's life in ours that resembles the fecundity of a garden. Perhaps most of all when we bring forward bread and wine, the fruit of the field and the work of human hands, we strive to depict the right relationship between God, humanity, and the earth. And this is no sentimental portrayal today, as we all know. For no moment in the liturgy is more poignant in our current period of human existence than this handing over of the bread of our ordinary life and the wine of eternal life – when we embody our prayer to God to show us how to get that relationship between heaven, humanity and the earth right.

The Bible sets before us one further location that stands in creative tension with the garden and with the city. And that location is the desert. The desert is a place sometimes of danger and sometimes of death. It is a place in the book of Exodus of murmuring, of the people's rebellion against God and their punishment with 40 years of wandering. It is a place of evil, temptation and redemption, as the tradition of the sending out of the scapegoat and later the 40 days of Jesus in the wilderness make clear. It is a place of revelation, most evidently in the burning bush, in the voice of John the Baptist in the wilderness, and in Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. And just as the garden is linked logically to the plow and the harvest field, so the desert is linked by a similar logic to that archetypal place of revelation, the mountain. It is on the mountain, itself a deserted and sometimes desolate place, that Moses receives the Ten Commandments, Elijah hears the still small voice, and Jesus is transfigured in glory and later taken up to heaven.

The desert stands in many ways as a perpetual critique of the city and the garden. Both the city and the garden aspire to be places of settlement, of certainty, or permanence. The architecture of Duke Chapel is undoubtedly a mixture of the human aspirations of the city and the divine abundance of the garden. But the desert is a very significant theme in the Bible, and in our Christian life. It literally represents the shifting sands of uncertainty, doubt, and mystery. Most of all it represents the image of journey, of pilgrimage, of the incompleteness of what we so far have and know, of the need to pack light, travel on, and settle for nothing less than the ultimate prize. Since our building at Duke Chapel is so invested in the settled themes of garden and city, we especially work hard to ensure our liturgy represents these vital, challenging and renewing themes of our pilgrimage through the wilderness. And so we spend a lot of time on the move. It must take five or ten minutes to get our huge choir to process in and out but what it is saying is not "Haven't we got a wonderful choir" but "We are the people of God and we are a pilgrim people." We may worship in beautiful surroundings that speak of the way

in the book of Revelation the garden and the city become one, but fundamentally we have no abiding city and we journey on, seeking the city that is to come. Our processional journey at the start of the service recalls the journey the children of Israel made into the wilderness to worship God away from Pharaoh's clutches. Our journey to read the gospel recalls the long journey God made in Christ to find us and bring us home. And our recessional journey at the end of the service reminds us that we are sent out in the power of the Spirit to live and work to God's praise and glory.

So here are the three key scriptural places of encounter with God: the city, the garden and the desert. Three thousand years ago King Solomon strove to bring these three themes together under one roof. He built the Temple in Jerusalem, to synthesize the sacred space of the walled garden, the divine commerce of the city, and the completed pilgrimage of the people's exodus from Egypt. And yet the Temple collapsed in the catastrophe of the exile, with the sacred garden overgrown by the worship of other gods, the glory of Jerusalem exchanged for the idolatry of Babylon, the everlasting pilgrimage calcified by a static sense of entitlement. We are always at risk of making the same mistakes. We too are always liable to make our Jerusalem a Babylon, to neglect our garden, to halt our perpetual pilgrimage. But the center of our Christian story is not a Temple. The center of our Christian story, where the strands of city, garden and desert are woven into one, is not a permanent, eternal Temple... but a fragile, provisional tent. In John chapter 1 verse 14 we read, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" – that's to say, "the Word became flesh and set up his *tent* among us." And finally in Revelation chapter 21, when the holy city comes down and there is no more desert and the glorious healing garden is all around, the voice from the throne says "Behold, God's dwelling – God's *tent* – is among mortals." It is the *tent* that unites the provision of the outdoor garden or field, the interaction and concourse of the city, and the desolation and pilgrimage of the desert. The Word became flesh and set up his *tent* among us. Behold God's tent is among us, his people. Jesus is the vortex of the scriptures, the epicenter of the images of God, the summit of the three stairways to heaven.

And here in today's epistle Paul takes us that one stage further. He talks of planting and growing, and says "You are God's field". And then he turns toward the city and says "You are God's building." And finally he recognizes the work of Christ and says "you, you Corinthians, are God's Temple." You are the place of encounter between God and his people. You are the place where others will meet God. You are the tent that unites the city and the garden and the desert.

This is what all the formality and movement and dressing up of liturgy are all about. We gather together in a special place on a Sunday morning to be transformed as a city from the exile of Babylon to the glory of the new Jerusalem. We gather to be lifted up from the unrewarding toil of the field to the bursting fertility of the garden. We gather to be encountered on the long walk of pilgrimage by the God who is revealed in the desert. *And all these hopes are crystallized when God in Christ sets up his tent among us.* Sets up his tent in scripture and in sacrament. And we leave this place, encountered and blessed by God, as ourselves God's tent, the place of encounter, the place where God's glory dwells. We leave this place ready to meet God and make him known in the challenges and temptations of the city, in the pain and fear of wilderness and the waste places of the earth, and in the stillness and growth of the garden. This is liturgy. This is worship. This is the scripture come alive in us.