

Close Encounters of the Third Kind

Sunday's Scripture was about the construction of Solomon's Temple, which caused us to consider why temple worship is so important.

1. Warm-up Question: Sometimes work schedules and other unavoidable conflicts keep us from Sunday worship. Other times we just play hooky. When you play hooky, what's your favorite alternative Sunday morning activity? (Confession is good for the soul. ☺)
2. I Peter 2:11 describes us as "aliens and exiles" here on planet earth. It's a feeling captured in that old hymn that says, "This world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through." We often feel like Adam and Eve after they were kicked out of the garden and separated from God. Like ET, we long to "phone home," so as to reconnect to our Source. Jeff compared us to Coco, who deep into Alzheimer's still carried a dim memory of who she was, where she came from, and who her father was – waiting to be awakened by a song.
 - a. Do you feel like an "alien and exile" here on earth? Why or why not?
 - b. Do you long for deeper connection to God? If so, how would you describe that feeling and why you feel that way?
3. Jeff suggested that our longing for deeper connection to God is what drives us to build temples. Temples are meant to be intermediate spaces that bridge the gap between heaven and earth – sacred places where the atmosphere, acoustics, lighting, feel, and mood is optimized to temporarily liberate us from all the mundane distractions of life and bring us back in touch with our Source. In short, temples are meant to be "thin places."

"A thin place is where the veil between this world and the eternal world is thin. . . . A thin place pulsates with a [spiritual] energy that connects with our own energy – we feel it, but we do not see it. We know there's another side – another world – another existence." (ThinPlacesTour.com.)

 - a. What's the most magnificent temple you've ever been in? Did it feel like a "thin place" to you?
 - b. Tell us about a "thin place" you've experienced that was not inside a temple. What made that place so special for you?
4. Read I Kings 6:1-2 and 8:1-13.
 - a. How do you think Solomon and the Israelites felt when construction of the temple got underway?

- b. The Ark of the Covenant symbolized the presence of God with the Israelites. When the ark was taken into the inner sanctum of the newly built temple, “a cloud filled the house of the Lord so the priests could not stand to minister . . . , for the glory of the Lord filled the house.” How do you picture this happening – describe the scene as you envision it. How do you think those who experienced it felt?
5. If we humans typically experience temples as “thin places,” that raises the question why. What makes temples so conducive to encountering God? Jeff suggested three reasons: (a) Focus – we go to temples to worship for the same reason people go to gyms to exercise, to avoid distractions and focus; (b) Spiritual Energy – when a bunch of people pool their spiritual energy in one place, it creates a place of unusual spiritual energy that we cannot replicate at home or in the woods; and (c) Expectation – the lighting, sound, and symbols of sacred space activate the part of the brain associated with feeling close to God, creating an expectation of encounter within us.
 - a. Do you find it difficult to focus on spiritual things at home? Do you find it easier in the temple? Why?
 - b. When you’re at church, do you sense the concentration of spiritual energy? How would you describe it to someone who’s never experienced it?
 - c. Do you think the atmosphere of temples – lighting, sound, religious symbols – heighten your sense of expectation that you will encounter God? Why?
6. When Solomon’s temple was dedicated, God promised, “My eyes and my heart will be there [in the temple] for all time.” The idea is that the temple is a place where God sees through us and where we sense God’s heart, *i.e.*, what God wants to say to us.
 - a. Jeff shared stories of several people who have encountered God in the temple:
 - ✓ A skeptical woman in our congregation who, during Holy Communion, experienced a dark veil being pulled aside, revealing the beautiful, loving light of Christ, drawing her to faith.
 - ✓ A poet and scholar, Christian Wiman, who found himself drawn to church after his cancer diagnosis. At church he experienced all his wounds being torn open (God seeing through him) and yet found deep comfort (the heart of God).
 - ✓ Jeff’s experience at Highlands Church in Denver when a woman sang “Eli, Eli,” while her 4-year old daughter spontaneously dance.

Tell us about a time you’ve encountered God in the temple in a powerful way.

- b. Sunday’s sermon ended with a time of quiet contemplation, as we opened ourselves to God’s eyes and heart. We darkened the lights and listened to “Eli, Eli” being sung. What did you experience during that time? Did you receive any messages from God?
 - c. How important is temple worship to you? Do you think it needs to be a priority?