

Ever since the dawn of time, in every culture, there has been a need, a desire to designate some space as sacred, space set apart from everyday uses for religious or cultic use, space made sacred by some event or incident that happened there or because a “sacred” person lived or spent some time there. You can list off some very obvious examples of sacred space - the Pyramids in Egypt or in Central America; the Temples of Rome or Greece; the Buddhist monasteries of Tibet; the medieval Cathedrals of Europe. The incident involving Jesus that we read about today from the Gospel of John took place in the sacred space that was the Jerusalem Temple. Of course that very space, even though only a tiny part of that Temple still remains is still “sacred space”, not only to one faith but to faith – Judaism and Islam – sacred space a symbol and maybe even a cause of religious and political divide that is the Middle East.

Beyond such sacred places many of us could likely add a list of places we hold to be sacred – and here I am not thinking about Death Valley or Williams-Brice Stadium or the Old Course at St. Andrew’s – I am more thinking about the church in which we were baptized or raised, the church where we were married, this church or some other church where your faith was nurtured and shaped. But it is also true that the term and meaning of “sacred space” is not at all limited to houses of worship – for those of us who teach, every classroom is somehow sacred; for those who practice law, the courtroom; for doctors and surgeons the clinic or the operating room; for Mayors or Politicians the legislature or the Debating Hall; for musicians or artists or performers the studio or the Symphony Hall or the theater. Many of us have “sacred space” somewhere in the outdoors where are caused to marvel and wonder – a beach at sunrise or sunset, a mountain top, a verdant valley, a river or lake view. Some of us even have some very strange places that were somehow “sacred” – back in Scotland I grew up in a town where coal and steel were king – it used to be that the red sky at night was when the furnaces were opened and every time Janice and I would drive into town from a certain direction there was a spot on the road when as you crested a hill I would slow down so we could see all the steel works, and chimneys and factories – kinda odd don’t you think? – sure, that is what Janice thought – but that was also a type of “sacred space” for all the people who worked there – and yes, historically there was a dilemma – for all the people whose livelihoods depended on these heavy industries while not enough attention was paid to caring for the environment. Some of you may well have had similar feelings to watching the loss of all the mills around Rock Hill – yes we did not know then what we know now about the effect of chemicals or the need for environmental controls but those mills and the lives they maintained made them “sacred space”.

To take us further into the topic for today about sacred space and an abundant life I want to talk about some of my experiences from the spring and summer of 2005 when I sailed as a deckhand on the Freedom Schooner Amistad, part of the crew that sailed aboard the Amistad from Mystic CT, to Bermuda.

Yes, you are right, I am not much of a sailor! I have never owned a boat; I never expect to own a boat. Prior to sailing on the schooner I had spent exactly one afternoon with a pastor colleague on his small yacht tacking across Lake Lanier Georgia – not exactly the same conditions I would face on the open Atlantic Ocean! The opportunity to sail on the Amistad was part of a sabbatical and it was a very powerful and meaningful experience.

Some of you will be aware of the name Amistad or the Amistad Incident from the Steven Spielberg movie, “Amistad”; some of you may be aware from your study of and awareness of history; and some

of you may even have seen or stood on the vessel on some visit of the ship to Charleston or some other port. In brief, the Amistad incident of 1839 happened when some African captives illegally brought on a slave ship across the Atlantic Ocean to Havana, Cuba were then sold and were being transported on a Baltimore Schooner, a cargo vessel, La Amistad (Spanish for "Friendship"), to some other destination, when they overwhelmed their captors and took charge of the ship. Their attempt to steer the ship back home to West Africa was thwarted and eventually, having sailed up the eastern seaboard of the United States, they and their ship were taken into custody by a US warship and the captives ended up in prison in New Haven, CT on murder charges. And, yes, in 1839 the matter of slavery was becoming more and more controversial, slavery having already been abolished in several States, and the importation of any persons against their will having been banned by the United States government.

Forces on both sides of this issue saw the Amistad case as an opportunity to advance their cause. The result was a legal case went all the way to the United States Supreme Court, where then former President, John Quincy Adams, presented the argument that the captives were free people being held against their will and so could not be convicted of murder. In a landmark, civil rights decision, the Court declared that the captives were indeed free people and guilty of no crime.

The Freedom Schooner Amistad which was built as a re-creation of the original cargo ship La Amistad, was launched in the year 2000 and since then has sailed all up and down the east coast, to Bermuda, and more recently sailed across the Atlantic to the United Kingdom, to Sierra Leone and to Cuba. I would want to argue that the Freedom Schooner Amistad is indeed sacred space.

Here is what I mean, Amistad is sacred space because it has been designed, dedicated, set apart, to represent something beyond itself; it has been specifically created and shaped to bear witness to an important story, a story with something to say about and to our contemporary world; as it sails it expresses a better way of seeing the world. Amistad is sacred space because the ship offers space where people can celebrate a very unique event and story, it offers a space where people of every background can to begin to live into this story by the way they form community, by the way they embrace and welcome other people into both the space and the story.

Amistad by its existence and its presence draws people into new experiences, they are moved, changed, caused to go past and beyond what they might normally do. That is of course what happened to me in the six weeks in which I was part of the crew – I was forever marked and changed by my experience and I saw many times over how people who visited the ship while we were open for public tours were themselves challenged and moved and caused to think and see things differently. When anyone steps aboard the ship they are drawn into a diverse community of people by age, ethnicity, and experience; they hear and experience elements of the story of the captives, joining together in onboard tasks that require teamwork and cooperation. Visitors are caused to wonder and marvel, at the terror faced by those taken with violence from their homes and families, to be placed in ghastly, intolerable conditions; and also at the courage of the captives taking over the ship and seeking to cross a mighty ocean only to be imprisoned yet again and made pawns in a political feud not of their own making. We should also note that Amistad is sacred space by its plan and desire to express its mission in ways demonstrate care for creation. That justice for people can never be fully separated from the need for justice for the environment.

From Amistad sailing the ocean blue we can return right here to Rock Hill. Those who work and serve at the Hope House, offering care for those in need, they know, as they do this, that they are in sacred space; likewise those who toil in the Hope Garden, or serve a meal at the Dorothy Day Soup Kitchen, or those who volunteer to build a Habitat House or our middle schoolers who had such a meaningful experience in their recent Mission Trip to the Duvall Home, or those who join together in hosting our Family Promises guests - they all know that they have spent and are spending time in sacred space, connecting as they do their faith, their, and our call to give and serve to the very real needs of others. Yesterday at the Memorial Service for Harriet Baer we were reminded of how by means of the TV broadcast on CN2, people who are unable to be here in person come to share our sacred space as they unite in worship as the Service is broadcast.

Isn't it obvious from all that I have so far said that "sacred space" immediately connects to our activities as people. For us in the church the only justification for having and maintaining and caring for the "sacred space" of our Sanctuary and Chapel, the Fellowship Hall and Activity Center or classrooms lies in what this space allows us to do so that we can seek to align our living with the plans and purposes of God, so that we can invited and include all of God's children in the life of our church, so that we can witness to our God by serving those in need or in trouble. The only reason for a church to have space, to have "sacred space" is to help us be the community of the faithful, the church of the Risen Lord, the church open to and for all people – if we do not use our space for those ends then it is very likely that we do not need the space.

Our call to maintain "sacred space" also requires that we pay attention to how we care for that space and how we care for creation as a whole. It is God who calls us to care for creation, and God needs us to begin to observe that care right here in our own sacred space.

There was once a man marooned on a desert island, he had been there for several years before he was found and rescued. When he was found by a passing ship, the captain of the ship went ashore and was quite amazed at all the buildings the man had built around his island using wood and bamboo. He saw the man's home, and a larger building beside it, he asked what the larger building was. "Oh that is my church!" Walking to a different cove the captain saw a yet larger, even more elaborate building, and so he asked, "What is this building?" Came the reply, "Oh, that, that is the church I used to go to!"

My friends we are here, together, today in sacred space, we are standing and sitting on holy ground, gathered in this way let us remind ourselves that all that we have and are is for the sake of living out our calling to love and serve and follow Jesus Christ. Let us recall that loving, serving, following Jesus Christ is our life's work, and that all the blessings and gifts we have been given by God are for sharing, and passing on, and giving away so that all sorts of people here in our own community and around God's world might come to know for themselves the love and goodness of God.

Because God cares for us, we care for God; because God cares for us, we care for all God's children; because God cares for us, we care for God's world – we can never limit God's care, we can never limit our care for all that God has made, for God's world, for God's creation. Amen.