

## A Home for the Lord

Exodus 34:29-32; Luke 9:28-36 (37-43)

Given on the Feast of the Transfiguration, February 14, 2010  
at the Union Church of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn © 2010 Rev. Mary B. Speers, Pastor

This week I went to the opening of a show called “To Live Forever” at the Brooklyn Museum. It’s a very interesting show, from their extensive Egyptian collection, and it goes into the why and how of Egyptian funerary culture, from the rich (stone and gold that we think of from King Tut and all) to the more ephemeral creations of the poor (wood and fabric)—and those are the real treasures, if you ask me, because fragile as they are, that wood and fabric, they are here all this time later.

Now you’re saying, “how depressing, how morbid.” Well, it’s true that most of the Egyptian art we see *is* funerary art—so we get the idea that the Egyptians were obsessed with death—but really it depends on how you look at it.

I remember back in 1978, when I was working on the King Tut show at the Metropolitan Museum, they unveiled the new, renovated galleries of the Egyptian Wing. What a revelation! You remember, some of you—it used to be a kind of dusty beige, all of it. There were all the old familiar pieces, but fresh and new, with a thick green carpet, like the banks of the Nile, a lush lawn under foot, instead of the cold, hard limestone there had been before, and colors and light everywhere, and suddenly I realized the ancient Egyptians weren’t obsessed with death at all: on the contrary, all that art was teeming with life. They loved life so much, it was so precious and, especially four thousand years ago, so fleeting, that they wanted to do everything possible, as they understood the world, to keep life alive.

The body, in their thinking, was the house of the soul, the *ka*— you remember this—and that was why they felt the need to preserve it. And it wasn’t until modern times that later generations even knew how they did it. And when I grew up and actually worked in a museum for awhile, repairing dioramas, polishing yaks’ noses, and vacuuming mummies—yes I really did that!—I learned that the mummies are still disintegrating, just much more slowly than they would otherwise have done.

Of course, I thought, *of course* we see nothing but their funerary art: that’s what’s been buried underground all these centuries, and therefore preserved, so that we can dig it up. That’s how anything from that long ago has survived, and

in that sense, it has even lived forever, or as my seminary professor used to say, at any rate it “lasted longer than most things”.

Peter, James, and John want to make this moment last; they want to make dwellings, booths, tabernacles, some translations say, honoring the Greek, for Jesus, Moses and Elijah—to preserve and enshrine this moment for all time, it seems. Now how many sermons have you heard—because Transfiguration comes around every year—from plenty of preachers (including me, I think), disparaging this desire of theirs to build these shrines, as it were: one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah?

How many times have preachers said, and it’s true enough, I suppose, that you can’t put God in a box, that God won’t live in temples made with human hands, you can’t imprison the Spirit, or maybe that you can’t stay up on the mountain forever, which is true, you shouldn’t build shrines but rather *do* the things Jesus said, and so on and so forth.

All true, sure, but I can see your eyes glazing over—in fact, one of you is nodding out already. So what am I to say to you today? I am here to tell you that yes, there *is* a way to build a home for the Lord, a shrine for the Lord: it all depends on how you look at it.

Let’s talk, shall we, about this business of building dwellings, of making shrines, about preserving, and about living. Making shrines is a very human impulse, and in fact there’s a whole festival devoted to it (anybody ever visit sukkahs in the fall?): Sukkoth, the Feast of Booths, a harvest festival in which Jewish people remember their forty years *tabernacling*, camping in tents or booths, in the desert.

When I was a little girl and got to go to New York with my parents, I always wanted to go to the Museum of the City of New York to see the dioramas and the dollhouses. Or else I wanted to go to the Egyptian Wing of the Metropolitan Museum (before the renovation) and look at all the little houses and the little boats—I remember the little bakery with all the loaves on shelves and the little people kneading the dough. I remember the little boat with all the oarsmen and the even-littler coxswain sitting at the back.

And I remember going to visit my grandparents and, when I was ten, finally being allowed to open my grandmother’s dollhouse and actually play with it. But I found something out then that speaks to our story today: I wanted, just as Peter wants, to *make* something for it—and that dollhouse had *everything*.

There was nothing lacking: between my grandmother and my mother and all those birthdays and Christmases, it was completely full, completely finished, with no room left for anything from any other little girl. I have it still, and it's beautiful, but the dollhouse I actually played with was the one my father made, and it is *still* unfinished: there is still a home, there is still room, in it for little girls in the future.

So you see, it's the *building* of the dwelling, not *preserving* it, that makes it holy—not the thing itself, which is just a material object, gathering dust and slowly disintegrating. When you're working on it, building it with love, it's alive, and that's the first thing about this dwelling for the Lord I'm talking to you about today, it has to be *alive*.

All right. Now here's the next thing. You can't take it with you—although the ancient Egyptians (and the Tang Dynasty Chinese, and other cultures too) certainly tried. Every tiny detail of life modeled in miniature, so that everything they—and we—love about life is there, represented in the afterlife.

But take all this stuff together, even in miniature—who can carry all of it? Put it all together, and you need a whole wing in a museum!

If you're going to make a house for the Lord, you see, it has to be *portable*.

Now the rest of the Book of Exodus tells us, in sometimes exhausting and repetitive detail, how Moses and Aaron and the Children of Israel built a portable sanctuary according to God's directions, a portable tabernacle—that's the Greek word—for the Lord, and even right up to the time of King David, the Temple wasn't a stone temple at all, but a sort of an elaborate booth or a tent, still built according to God's specifications as laid out in the Book of Exodus. It was an embarrassment to King David among his colleagues in the king business: he told God that all the other nations had big showy temples for their gods, and that even he, King David, lived in a fabulous palace, and it was a disgrace that the God of Israel was still dwelling in a tent. And God told him no, don't you dare build me a house. God *wanted* to be in a tent. So this home for the Lord has to be *portable*.

But somehow it needs, doesn't it, our dwelling-place for the Lord, to have many rooms, or at least several, as Jesus says in John's Gospel, many "mansions" (it's that Greek word again, "tabernacles", "booths", "tents", "dwelling places:" "the Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us".)—this tabernacle we're

building for the Lord. It needs to have many rooms for all the multiplicities of this multifaceted life, this life we love so much—

Well, what's alive, and portable (you carry it around with you all the time), and has...well, four rooms, anyway?

That's right, happy Valentine's Day, it's your heart!

"Well, okay, that's nice, but so what," you say. What's that got to do with the face of Jesus shining with the white light of heaven, all the colors of the rainbow focused through the prism of the Person of Jesus, the Messiah?

Well, you can't get around it: unfortunately, you *do* have to take your living, portable, many-mansioned heart *back down the mountain*, into that crowd and those crazy people, to find out. You have to move into human heartbreak, into human need, and most importantly, *beyond your circle of comfort*, to find out.

And that's what the season of Lent invites us to do.

Because all those preachers weren't exactly wrong, there *is* a danger in building God a house. Once it's built, once it's finished, it has already begun to fall apart. That's why a lot of church-growth experts say it's healthy for a congregation to have a mortgage they're still paying off—keeps them on their toes. Doesn't sound right, does it, but that's what they say. It's building, not coasting, not snuggling in, and certainly not preserving, that counts, that keeps us alive.

And portability? That's the beauty of making our *hearts* the shrine for Jesus. If your heart is the shrine, then the love of Christ will show in your face from the inside out. You know that is true because you know people who are like that. And just as the Scripture says, none of them, and none of you, like Moses, will know that it's shining through you, but everyone around you will see it.

And many-mansioned-ness? I think—in fact, I know—that the more we make a home for the Lord in our hearts, the more homes our hearts will find, in all the other hearts we meet.

So, this Lent, I invite you to a faith that's alive, and portable, and indeed many-mansioned, with many dwelling-places, starting with Bay Ridge United Church and St Andrew's Church this very week, because—you are making a home in your heart for the Lord. And, if you carry that heart *down* the mountain, everyone around you will be transfigured as well. AMEN.