



David Rensberger\*

## REFLECTIONS ON A SPIRITUALITY OF PLACE

### Introduction

This is a set of reflections on a spirituality of place, rather than a scholarly treatment of the subject. You may find places where you agree and places where you disagree: nothing to prove here—just thoughts to consider. I will share a couple of my own experiences related to a spirituality of place and invite you to bring your own experiences into the conversation as well.

In fact, before you read further, pause to recall a place sacred to you, a place where you had an encounter with God. It may have been in a church; it may have been at home or at work; it may have been in an outdoor setting. It may have been recently or long ago. You may have been alone or with other people. Recall that place and time and let it come fully into your mind. What did you see, what did you hear, what did you smell? What did you feel in that place? Now imagine yourself visiting that place again, as you are today. How would that feel? What would you want to do if you were there?

This memory of “sacred place,” of a place where you met God, may stay in your mind as we consider the idea of a spirituality of place. Before we begin, though, let us define this somewhat slippery term “spirituality,” which can mean different things in different cultural and religious settings. The term “spirituality” can mean the experiences of life in relationship with God and the practices that make up this rela-

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tionship and keep it going. The experience, the practices, and the relationship are also shared with other people, with one's Christian community. Christianity itself, then, is seen as a life lived in relationship with God and with other people who share this primary relationship. Christian spirituality is the responses and actions that make up that life of relationship with God and with other people, the things that go together to form the quality or character of that life. Spirituality, understood in this way, is not the same as theology or ethics, though it is related to them. We might think of it as theology in practice, or perhaps better as theology *experienced*. "Spirituality" is not what people believe or think about God but what they experience as a result of their beliefs and ideas. Spirituality is also not simply morally right conduct, but conduct aimed at sustaining relationship with God (though in Christianity this inevitably includes a moral and ethical component).

### Place and Spirituality

In Protestant theology, we tend to think of the spiritual, that which relates us to God, as disconnected from specific places and times. We believe that God is present everywhere and at all times. We do not believe that we need to go to a holy place or wait for a sacred season to find God. Yet in our experience as spiritual and religious people, we often find that place and time do matter. For example, there are just some things we think should and should not be done in a church building. Christmas and Easter are special times for us and our congregations. And many of us, as the exercise you just did implies, have had encounters with God in particular locations that continue to have a sacred character for us.

In this light, consider Genesis 28:10-19:

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!' And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

This etiological story explains the origin of Bethel, the site of a sacred shrine in Israel,<sup>1</sup> by identifying it as a place where Israel's ancestor Jacob had had an encounter with God

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<sup>1</sup>See Judges 20:18 NRSV; 1 Samuel 10:3 NRSV; 1 Kings 12:28-33 NRSV; Amos 4:4-5; 7:10-13 NRSV.

and, therefore, had recognized the place itself as "the house of God," "the gate of heaven." Places where God has been experienced do inevitably seem to take on a quality suggesting God can still be found there. In our lives, we may also have had "Bethel experiences," and mentally, at least, set up our sacred pillars and altars in those places. Part of this has to do with the social nature of human spirituality. Our relationship with God is not just something that we have and do as individuals, but something that we share with other people, as a community. Communities of belief and worship create spaces where God is acknowledged, praised, and encountered. These places tend to be perceived as sacred, because the communities treat them in that way, and this can continue even when the worshipping community changes. Jerusalem itself was a Canaanite worship center before David put the ark there. Christians have a long history of building churches where other churches had been, and indeed where synagogues or even pagan temples had been. We seek God in places where we know that others have done so and in places where we have encountered God. If we share our experiences with others, they become spiritually significant.

There are some places, moreover, that just seem appropriate for worship in and of themselves. Something about them seems to attract the human spirit toward the Divine. When my family and I traveled to Israel more than thirty years ago, we took a trip to Mount Gerizim in the central part of the country. This mountain has been sacred for many, many centuries to the Samaritans, the "other" Israelite people with whom Jews have a difficult sibling relationship. From the top of the mountain, you can see all the way to the Mediterranean to the west and across the Jordan to the east. On the day we visited, there was a powerful wind streaming

across the top of the mountain from the sea. In the warm sun, with the wind and the amazing view, I could easily tell why people would think this place was sacred. Certain kinds of places have always attracted worshippers and people seeking encounter with God: mountains, like Gerizim; Zion; and Sinai (also known as "Horeb the mountain of God," where Moses, the people of Israel, and the prophet Elijah all met God<sup>2</sup>; and other mountains too, such as the Greek Olympus and the Canaanite Hermon; deserts, such as those in the Sinai Peninsula and in Egypt and Syria; rivers, like the Jordan.

There does seem to be a connection between place and spirituality, then, and perhaps we need to be less restrictive about this in our theology. Of course, we want to be careful to avoid any kind of idolatry that limits God to particular places and times or treats created things as interchangeable with the Creator. Yet the biblical stories of Bethel and Sinai/Horeb, or the story of Jesus' transfiguration on "a high mountain,"<sup>3</sup> suggest that we ought to accept some places in a sense as "transparent" to God and recognize the reality that the places where God has been encountered in ages past remain places where that sense of encounter can still be felt. Our experiences with God do not happen in a vacuum. They are not restricted to special places, since God is not restricted to any place. But they do occur in specific places, and when we acknowledge this fact; we can welcome such places as having meaning for our spiritual lives, our lives with God.

Though unable to join the trip to the Holy Land that this issue of *JITC* celebrates, a few months later my wife and I made a pilgrimage of our own. We took part in a two-week

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<sup>2</sup>Exodus 3:1; 19: 1-25 NRSV; 1 Kings 19:8-18 NRSV.

<sup>3</sup>Mark 9:2-8 NRSV.

tour of sites in Europe important for the Anabaptist wing of the Reformation. The Mennonite church to which we belong is part of the modern heritage of the Anabaptists, as was the case with the other people on the tour. Our guide was Professor John D. Roth of Goshen College in Indiana, a Mennonite-related school. Thus, the trip was spiritually meaningful for all concerned. We visited sites where Anabaptists had worshipped, had hidden from their Catholic and Protestant persecutors, and had suffered martyrdom.<sup>4</sup> We also visited contemporary Mennonite churches, some of which have occupied the same buildings for hundreds of years.

One of the striking things about many of those churches was that they did not look like churches from the outside. For a long time in many countries of Europe, the state authorities, in support of the official state churches, did not allow Anabaptists to build churches at all. Even when they gained the freedom to build, they were still forbidden to call their buildings "churches" or to construct them on the patterns of the Reformed, Lutheran, or Catholic churches. So in the little town of Pingjum in the Netherlands, we visited a "hidden church" that from the outside seemed to be simply another house on the village street. In fact, its front room was for a long time occupied as an apartment. It was not even called a "church" but a "*fermanje*," a "place of exhortation." Yet, when we walked down a short hall and opened a door, we found ourselves in familiar surroundings: the seating space, the pulpit, the board at the front showing the hymn

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<sup>4</sup>For more information on this history, see J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist: The Origin and Significance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 2d ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005); and C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995). For information online, go to <http://www.gameo.org/> or <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/>.

numbers—all told us we were in a church. We had a similar experience at the much larger Singelkerk in Amsterdam. Only a simple sign on the front of an ordinary-looking building in the middle of a city block announces the presence of the Mennonite congregation, while just a few doors away a huge Catholic church towers over the neighborhood.

The most dramatic worship setting that we visited, however, was not in either a city or a village. It was a cave well out in the hills a few miles east of Zurich, Switzerland, known as the “Täuferhöhle,” the “Anabaptist Cave.” In the sixteenth century, Anabaptists fleeing persecution sought shelter and a safe place to worship there. The small cave, a slit in the hillside perhaps forty feet wide and thirty feet deep, looks out over a beautiful ravine with a small mountain stream flowing between firs and other trees. It is in some ways an obvious site for worship, one of those naturally sacred places where the Creator feels near. Yet, it was chosen for other reasons as well, for its remoteness and the difficulty that the “Anabaptist hunters” would have in finding it. Our small tour group was sobered to learn about this history, and yet glad to know that our forebears had found such shelters, and had found the courage to persist in worship and discipleship. We too spent some time praying and singing hymns in the cave. As it had been made sacred by those who sought it out hundreds of years ago, so we made it a place of worship for ourselves as well.

The “hidden churches” in towns and cities, as well as the “Anabaptist Cave,” show the strength of the desire for worship space. Even the simple preaching, praying, and singing services of the Anabaptists and their descendants benefit from a place marked off and set aside, repeatedly employed for this purpose. The “hidden churches” are a kind of inner

room, unknown to the world passing by, much as some people have an active prayer life in their inmost hearts that cannot be detected based on outward appearances. Sacred space can be a kind of shelter, a place where people who know life's difficulties and injustices only too well can in a sense relax and become themselves again, can remember who they are and who their neighbors are in the sight of God, can recover their sense of connectedness to God and to one another. Whether through architecture or through the discovery of a natural site that embodies both safety and mystery, we encounter God in particular places.

### Place and Particularity

God is in every place, and yet certain places seem especially fit for worship. Perhaps the truth is that in some kinds of places the presence of God just seems more obvious to us, while in others we may need to look more closely. That is to say, we need to get used to the idea of seeking out the holiness, the sacred quality, of every place.

This can be done more readily in some places than in others, of course. An airport hotel, for instance, is an airport hotel. In a way, it is no place at all, because it is so generic. It is no *specific* place; it is like any other hotel at any other airport. It is hard to find the sacredness of a place like that, not only because it was made by humans for a secular purpose, but also because it lacks much in the way of individual distinctiveness. As noted earlier, many of the places where God is encountered begin as natural settings (mountains, deserts, and rivers, etc.) and only gradually acquire human overlays. Perhaps this is because God and human beings take different approaches to creating places.



Humans, particularly in the modern era, tend to standardize. We want everything to be the same, to be immediately recognizable and familiar. All the airport Marriotts, all the McDonald's restaurants, look alike. This contributes to feeling at ease and to selling hamburgers, but it quickly leads to boredom and to a superficial relationship with place. We tend to regard places as interchangeable: "When you've seen one, you've seen them all." Even church buildings, at least within a given denomination, can all tend to seem the same. The result is that we take no interest in where we are at the moment, because it seems like everywhere else.

God, by contrast, does not standardize but particularizes in the creation of place. Every spot on earth is different and has its own particular character. There is the location itself and what can be seen from there: hills or plains, water or desert, forest or grassland, snow, sand, or clay. There are differences from place to place in the color and composition of the soil, the presence and the kind and the size of rocks, the type of weather that passes through, what grows there and what lives there. It is this particularity, the specific nature of a place, that is its sanctity and its holiness. Each place on earth has its own holiness and its own character given it by God. This is not a statement of scientific fact, of course, but rather a perception of the faithful eye and heart. It arises from our response to a creation that we perceive as made by the love of God; it is part of our knowledge both of God and of the natural world. The holy particularity of a place manifests both its own individuality and its Creator's love and wisdom.

So often, however, we are in a place without really being *present* there. We do not give our attention to the place, and so we miss its character, its qualities, its holiness. We do not look, we do not listen, we do not notice what is real about

the place, perhaps because, as suggested above, we assume that everything is standard and that every place is the same. How might we change this? How might we set about seeking the holiness of particular places? As with other spiritual realities, this holiness requires attentiveness on our part if we are to discern it. We need alertness and stillness and patience and love; we need to observe closely. Again, this is not scientific observation, although there are similarities: some of the same things, an attentiveness of the heart, a listening for what God is saying through this place. Therefore, what we may discover as the holiness of a place is not something objective or the same for every person, but is particular to each individual. It is part of each person's relationship with God when entering into conversation with God the Creator and with God's own relationship to the creation. We each bring something specific to this conversation, and so we each gain something specific from it, something that is particular to our own relationship with God. Our relationship to place is part of our spirituality, our dialogue with God in which we seek to hear in particular places from God who is present in all places, and then seek to respond to what we have heard.

This listening, discovery, and response requires staying in a place for awhile and giving it our prayerful interest and attention. To discover the holiness of a place that may seem ordinary—because it is ordinary—we must be there, be ourselves there, be present to the place and to God. Learning to be present in a particular place and to a particular place—to be present to God as God is made known in a given place and time—is a key area for spiritual growth for most people in the modern and postmodern world. Moreover, though each of us may come to know the holiness of a particular place in a specific way, we certainly also share such percep-

tions with others, consciously or unconsciously. Even if we are alone in a particular place at a particular time, it is seldom that we are the first or the last humans to set foot there. The communal nature of spirituality is such that the particular reality of any individual becomes part of the greater reality known to the wider community, as individuals make their contributions to the spiritual knowledge and experience of the community as a whole.

### Conclusion

Knowing God in a particular place, whether a church or a cave, is part of our human experience as spiritual people. Though we can pray and worship wherever we may be, place does matter. Getting a sense of the particular character of a place, of the precise way in which God is present there, can be a way of discovering the joy available to us in encountering God in that place. Any place where people have had such encounters seems to acquire a quality of sanctity. Seeking God in sacred places, whether sacred to countless thousands over many generations or sacred to us alone, can be part of what enables us to sustain the relationship into which God has drawn us and in which God is constantly seeking to renew us.

The first of these is the question of the nature of the church. The church is not a mere human organization, but a community of believers who are united to Christ by faith. This union is effected by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the hearts of believers and binds them together in love and fellowship. The church is thus a spiritual body, which is the body of Christ, and which is called to live in holiness and to witness to the world.

The second question is that of the church's mission. The church is called to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to all men, and to bring them to faith in Him. This mission is not limited to the preaching of the word, but includes also the practice of love and the service of the needy. The church is thus a community of love, which is to be a light and a salt to the world.

The third question is that of the church's authority. The church is not a mere human organization, but a community of believers who are united to Christ by faith. This union is effected by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the hearts of believers and binds them together in love and fellowship. The church is thus a spiritual body, which is the body of Christ, and which is called to live in holiness and to witness to the world.

The fourth question is that of the church's structure. The church is not a mere human organization, but a community of believers who are united to Christ by faith. This union is effected by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the hearts of believers and binds them together in love and fellowship. The church is thus a spiritual body, which is the body of Christ, and which is called to live in holiness and to witness to the world.

The fifth question is that of the church's history. The church is not a mere human organization, but a community of believers who are united to Christ by faith. This union is effected by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the hearts of believers and binds them together in love and fellowship. The church is thus a spiritual body, which is the body of Christ, and which is called to live in holiness and to witness to the world.

# Since This Time Last Year

Since this time last year  
I've been quite busy

Living	dying
Laughing	crying
Pained	healed
Hungry	filled

Since this time last year  
I've been quite busy—*yes, I have now!*

Birthing	burying
Strolling	hurrying
Gaining	losing
Compassionate	abusing

Since this time last year  
I've been quite busy—*can anybody relate?*

Greeting	leaving
Loving	grieving
Working	waiting
Satisfied	anticipating

Since this time last year  
I've been quite busy—*just keeping it real.*

Cussing	repenting
Full of grace	unrelenting
Feasting	fasting
Vulnerable	masking

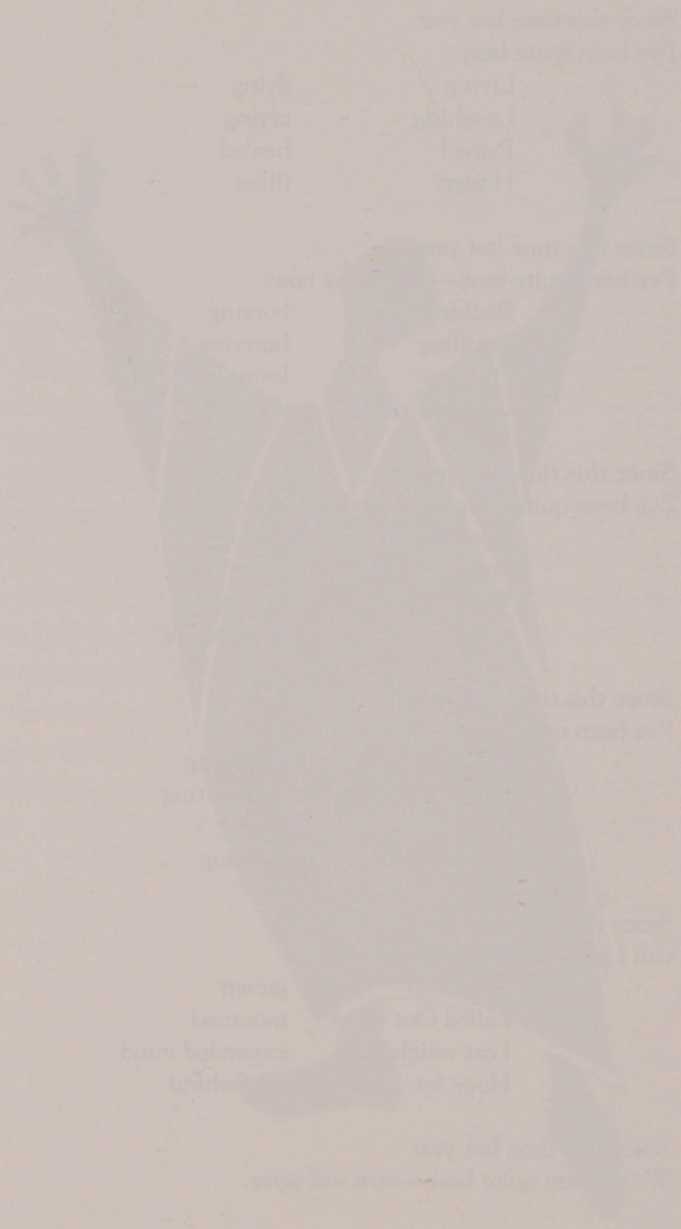
Since this time last year  
can I get a witness?—*We've*

Given up	grown
Laffed Out Loud	mourned
Lost weight	expanded mind
Hope for	left behind

Since this time last year  
We've been quite busy—*most will agree.*

Then ya'll don't mind if a sister sits a spell.  
I just need a moment to catch up with myself.

# Once This Time Last Year



I can't help but think of a year ago  
I can't help but think of a year ago  
I can't help but think of a year ago  
I can't help but think of a year ago

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