

Sermon for Christ Church, Spotsylvania, VA
Proper 18, Year B, September 9, 2018
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Encountering God"
1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43; Outdoor Worship

because we had planned to hold our 10:30 worship outdoors today, even though the weather has not cooperated, I want us to consider the question: Where do we encounter God?; we might presume that it is usually, or even exclusively, in a church or other consecrated space that we can only expect to encounter God; but is that true?

back in May a group of us went on the parish retreat to Shrine Mont; how many of you have ever gone there?; if you have, you know it is a special place apart, a place where many people feel God's presence better than other places; and especially being able to worship in the open-air stone church; the place aptly named: the Shrine of the Transfiguration; remember, Jesus was transfigured before several disciples—where?, on a mountaintop; and there, at Shrine Mont, many adults, and especially the children and youth who attend camps there, do experience both the literal and figurative "mountaintop experiences" associated with being nearer to God

but even as I recognize that many people have mountaintop experiences when they get away on retreats or get outdoors to beautiful places, I have to wonder, is there really any place which is nearer to God than any other?; if God, as the creator of all, valued the results of each and every day of creation's work—the sky, the sea, the land, the plants, the animals, the people—as all being "very good" (Genesis 1:31), then how can we place a higher or holier value upon one spot of ground than upon another? God is equally present in every place; it is our mistaken perception if we think a mountaintop is holier than a busy city street, or that the "Holy Land" is more beloved of God than a poor neighborhood in Haiti; or that God will be nearer to us inside this church building than out there beside the road; there is no land holier than any other; there is no place holier than any other

you might recall that two Sundays ago in our Old Testament reading, King Solomon spoke to this very issue; he had just constructed the most magnificent of Temples, with its "Holy of Holies," the place for humankind to encounter God; yet Solomon said, "will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even

heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you [God], much less this house that I have built!;” nothing contains God, and nothing restricts where God’s holiness can be encountered

similarly, think about our parish picnic this afternoon, which I certainly do hope all of you are planning on attending, even though we will have to be indoors; picnics are a lot of fun, but I doubt anyone ever thinks of any picnic as being on a par with Holy Communion— would you?; and yet, as we’ve been reading in John’s Gospel for all of August, Yahweh fed the Israelites with manna in the wilderness—a picnic! Jesus performed his miracle of the feeding of the 5000 where the people sat and ate on the grass—another picnic!; both of these Biblical experiences were theological precursor to Jesus’ institution of Holy Communion at the Last Supper

also, think about how many of Jesus’ parables and metaphors of “the Kingdom of God” or “the Kingdom of Heaven” have to do with people eating—and not eating liturgical meals, but family meals, wedding banquets, meals to which guests are invited, and feasts which celebrate the returns of ones who had been lost but now are found; they are not necessarily outdoors, but they all seem to have the qualities of excitement and fun like a picnic—sounds like Jesus is telling us that heaven itself is going to be—a picnic!

if it is not necessarily the place that brings holiness, the inside of a Temple or a church building, as opposed to anywhere else, and if it’s not necessarily the formality of a worship service’s liturgical meal, as opposed to any other meal that brings holiness, we’re back to our original question: Where do we encounter God?

what delivers us into God’s presence more than anything else is our state of mind and heart and soul; what is most important is our ability to recognize God’s presence anywhere and everywhere; Shrine Mont or the liturgy of church worship may put us in a more receptive frame of mind and heart and soul; but think about the possibilities open to us if we would put ourselves into that same receptive frame of mind and heart and soul no matter where we happened to be; think about the possibilities open to us if we would put ourselves into that same receptive frame of mind and heart no matter what we happened to be doing

so, we can encounter God anywhere we happen to be, if we are attentive to the reality that God is present everywhere; we can encounter God in whatever we happen to be doing, if we are attentive to the reality of God at work in every one of our activities; so be attentive to God everywhere; be attentive to God in everything; know that we can encounter God on any day, in any place