“The Power of Place”

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St. Joseph of Arimathea Anglican Theological College Chapel

Synod Mass – April 27, 2018

“And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” Gn 28:16-17

I

RUN THE RISK of making this sermon about myself, but that is not my intention. We find ourselves this morning in a *powerhouse*, a building once dubbed “*the EpiCenter*” – *epicenter* being a play on the words *Episcopal* and the *bulls-eye center of an earthquake*. We are smack dab in the middle of the People’s Republic of Berkeley, the center of the San Francisco Bay Area, at the extreme left coast of the great state of California, U.S. of A. But this is more than a point on our GPS app. There is power in this place. *How* *dreadful is this place*, as our *King James* has it, *terrible, awe-inspiring, fearful* in other translations: a power that you can feel, and that humbles and quiets your spirits before the *Presence of an Almighty God.*

I have history in every direction I face from this spot. I first came to Berkeley in the wet spring quarter of 1967: a new architecture student. I stayed in the dorms a couple blocks south of here, where the worst food I ever ate made me move that autumn to *Pi Lambda Phi* fraternity, just up Channing Way. *Pi Lams* were a Jewish fraternity—until I showed up. They made me an honorary member of the tribe and called me *Hansenstein*.

I held a drafting desk for 5 years on the 9th floor of the gigantic and grotesque, pre-cast concrete, Wurster Hall, to our northeast. As the School of Architecture, the building was naturally the ugliest atrocity on campus, designed by Bishop Morse’s longtime friend, John Carl Warnecke, in the new design school called *Brutalism*. Warnecke is better known for the austere design of the Kennedy gravesite at Arlington National Cemetery. I spent 5 years learning a trade I would never be employed in, but it did come in handy renovating an old church.

In this city, I took part in the Cultural Revolution that cast off all moral and religious restraints. I *had* tried to involve myself with church my first few quarters, going to St. Mark’s Episcopal down Bancroft but finding that the university chaplain at *that* time, who was also dean of CDSP, Father Shunji Nishi, offered us no answers, only questions. So I went hippy, new age, long-haired and totally lost. A friend of mine says, *“If you remember the 60s, you weren’t there.”* But *do* I remember them. I was several times tear-gassed, crowd-controlled by the Alameda County Tactical Squad, kept indoors after curfew, resenting the helicopters constantly circling overhead, joined the student strike against the war, sported bellbottoms and tie-dye shirts, and graduated with honors. *Somehow.*

During those years I moved from the frat house into Oakland, and living marginally in a tiny studio apartment, I met the manager, a girl named *Giti*, two years younger than I, and *that* particular question was answered for the rest of my life. We lived 2 miles down College Avenue but just a couple of blocks from a church called St. Peter’s. She expressed interested in the large brick church. I discouraged her. *I’d already been an Episcopalian, thanks.*

We married, had our son born in Berkeley at Alta Bates Hospital, tried a move to the Middle East, returned to the Bay Area, and I began 16 years working for contractors, estimating. Once, in 1975, Giti and I walked down Durant Avenue and saw this building being erected. She asked me about it, and I, with all my training, declared it an Orthodox Church and figured I’d never see the inside.

A few years later, *beleaguered by new age lies and devils of deception,* my wife was powerfully swept up by Jesus in person from a Berkeley sidewalk, given hope and new life, and she was sent home to find a church for her baptism, and to help her husband return to a church he had departed in his youth. I was 30 years old.

She chose *this one*.

It was the summer of 1979, and the Iranian Revolution was raging, the land of her birth in violent turmoil. Father George Rutler was substituting for one ‘*Bishop Morse’* we’d never met, who was on an Eastern European holiday. Giti came here alone for a 5:30 evening Mass and, when she first entered, she crossed this floor and nearly went straight out the back door, still looking for the church. There were no pews. Embarrassed (*for no reason*), she turned back, heard a liturgy she couldn’t take part in, joined the little congregation for their sherry hour, then sat enthralled by Fr. Rutler’s Bible study. It was the Bible study that cinched it for her. If these people knew the Bible, this was the church for her.

It took me longer. I was in resistance to the Christianity I’d left and had counted as flawed. *It* *was flawed*, *of course,* not *me.* But Giti’s certainty that *something wonderful happened here* led me to join her one Sunday evening in August, and I came into this place, and I faced God.

Since that day, I’ve had a relationship with this tile floor. It’s so humble you may miss the power of it. Dog prints can be traced, *dogs that ran across the clay squares as they lay baking in the village sun.* The edges are uneven. It hurts to kneel on this floor. I’ve spent many hours on it, feeling the pain turn to God’s pleasure in me. *I can’t explain that*, but it’s something akin to Jacob using a rock as a pillow, and having a frightful dream of angels on a ladder that told him that this was *Bethel*, the *House of God*. *How dreadful is this place!* These tiles more than any other feature of this chapel make me know that God is here. As I say, *I can’t explain that.*

The liturgy was entirely familiar to me: I knew every word of it. I’d been brought up under a wonderful priest in Los Angeles, Fr. Harley Wright Smith. Fr. Rutler began, *“Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open…”* and we lifted off. I knew the responses by heart. I took communion, though I should have made a long confession first. Giti couldn’t believe I had this in my background and hadn’t shared it with her. But I didn’t know what I had.

The worship didn’t close the deal for me. After cheese, crackers and sherry, Fr. Rutler led a Bible study in the back building where the sacristy is now: St. John chapter 2, the Wedding at Cana. In 80 minutes, he’d threaded passages from half the books of the Bible, in and out of Christ turning water to wine. I wish I could remember it. But it stunned me. This was *true*. And if true, I could go nowhere else.

Fr. Rutler remained a few more weeks, then disappeared as one Sunday evening, with a hushed excitement rippling through this space – *the Bishop!* – and I saw a fearsome sight. A giant, like a white haired polar bear under a huge green burlap rug, strode in like he owned the place. That deep, resonant voice entranced everyone: my wife was fascinated by him. But I felt my knees give way. I felt certain that if I didn’t get up and run away from here, my life wouldn’t be my own ever again. At the end of the service, I said, *“Let’s go!”* And she said, *“Isn’t he wonderful?”* We were both right.

Of course we stayed, and he was very happy to meet us, and suggested, for our son’s sake, that we join St. Peter’s and its Sunday School. Giti and Jamal were baptized that September, and the next year Bishop Morse appointed me *Pledge Drive Chairman*. That led to meeting *Fr. Andre*. A great conspiracy with heaven at its nexus was telling me *I would be a priest*. I didn’t want to hear that, but after Fr. Andre, the Russian hermit monk, a guest at St. Peter’s vestry one night, and who literally shook me, I felt, and I almost *saw,* God’s sword pass right through my heart and out my back. That was at the Faculty Club, just over there. It led me back here, to this floor, where for 5 years, I and two others, tackled a classic seminary education so that, in 1985, I was a graduate and a priest.

So this place has power for me. I can’t figure out if its architecture is 1st or 21st century. You enter here and you don’t know *when* you are. That’s *good*. We are *timeless*, not married to the *zeitgeist*, the *spirit of the age*. A church that marries the spirit of any age is destined to be a widow in the next one. We are *catholic* and we are *evangelists*, filled with *Holy Spirit power and authority*, and we are *orthodox* to the backbone. We’re the best-kept secret in Christianity.

But we still exist. The fact that we should have survived 40 years defies all the contrary voices that shouted at the backs of our founders at St. Louis, at Denver, from 815 2nd Avenue, New York. We were “stillborn, flying false colors, never to be heard from again. *Good riddance.”* A ripple of laughter from men in purple shirts from a boardroom. And yet here we still are.

Bishop Ashman chose for today *the Mass of the High Priest*, a new experience for us at a Synod Mass, and I think it a notable choice. The Epistle to the Hebrews uniquely examines Christ’s priesthood as a fulfillment of greater themes in God’s plan than the 1st Covenantal order, from Aaron and his sons down to our day, the family business of slaughtering animals to certify them Kosher. Giti has thanked God and me that I am not an Old Testament priest who would come home bloody and smelling of animal fear. *No*: it’s so much better than that.

Christ comes as a priest in another order, *like Melchizedek*, 20 centuries before Christ, who offered Abraham bread and wine and took tithes from him. He had no connection to Levi, who was not yet born. He was appointed and anointed by God only. *As are we* priests in the order of Christ Jesus.

People will often try to find the essence of one church versus another, looking over their founding documents, the ‘What We Believe’ statements on their webpages. *Good hunting*, I say, but Mission Statements are often high words of forgotten purposes. I often advise someone to stand at the back of a church and imagine rolling a bowling ball down the center aisle. What that ball hits will be the central thing that church does when it meets for worship. If it hits a large oak pulpit, you can bet the preaching will be the centerpiece of that hour and a half. If it hits a choir stand, it will be the singing. When it bumps up against a drum set, contemporary music will set the theme and be the draw for that music church. In our churches, you would bounce off an altar. There the sacrifice of Christ’s Body and Blood will be offered in simple elements of bread and wine, and taken by a priest to the people waiting there.

Signs and wonders, miracles, anointings, spiritual slayings, altar calls and gold glitter blowing from the air system, with tears of joy, all the varying offers of many places today that are changing their names from this or the other ‘Church’ to The Father’s House, Life Center, and Mosaic. All that we Anglicans have to offer is the Body and Blood of the living Jesus Christ at *our* altar call, the Communion Rail, and the real Presence of God Incarnate that is shared by all who come forward. *Why are we shy about sharing this treasure with others?* Why was I so sure, as a foolish young man, that I’d exhausted the truth claims of Christianity and could say I was smarter than this?

We are as central to the historic beliefs of 2,000 years of Christianity as it’s possible to be, or so I think. We are *Catholic, Orthodox, Spirit filled, and Evangelistic.* Our music is the top 600 of the last 1,500 years. More people tithe among us, more have consistent and committed attendance, more know the truths found in scripture than I find among the general Christian populace. *Am I saying we’re the best?* Ask God, not me. I don’t think that’s a meaningful question. But if we can keep this precious deposit, being the remnant of that sector of catholic faith that resisted Medieval Imperial and novel ‘improvements’ on the Apostles’ faith and record, and if we can transmit this precious charge to another generation, we have done our work. The rest is up to God.

No man takes the honor of the priesthood to himself. The priesthood is an appointment by God to bring a specific sacrifice before Him, to offer it worthily, and to be blessed to receive that offering, now transformed and bestowed to the priest, who can turn from that altar and give these blessed oblations to people awaiting fellowship with God. We see this completed in Christ’s institution of the Mass, and every Mass from every true priest. We see it also in the gift of every believer who offers his or her own *self*, *soul and body, to be a living sacrifice unto God, a reasonable and holy gift* that, when filled with God’s true Spirit, they are all a gift to this world. We can do no better thing in life than what we are about to do here this morning.

*Take heart*. God is living in you. Our movement has survived the long years, many failures, much opposition, and numerous competitors who now claim to be what we were long before they discovered it. God is not mocked. We were founded out of the genius that was in Robert Sherwood Morse as he built this chapel, one year before Minneapolis and the shipwreck of TEC. God was in this, and He still is.

Take heart and bring your joy back home to Santa Barbara, Woodinville, Omaha, Redding, Oakland, Los Angeles, Palo Alto, Westcliffe, Livermore, Grants Pass, Sioux City, Oakville, Portland, San Francisco and Victoria. We bear a treasure most holy, as the magi traversing the sands to Judea bearing their gifts. Partake of this today, and *take heart*. For *in this place*, you have been in the powerful Presence of God.

+PFH