

DWELLING PLACES

Randall Tremba

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21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

I King 8 (selected verses paraphrased)

Then King Solomon assembled the elders and chieftains of the tribes of Israel to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD to the Temple. The priests brought the ark into the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. And when the priests came out, a cloud filled the holy place so that the priests could do nothing because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD. Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD and spread out his hands to heaven and said, *Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!*

New Testament verses

God is love. Those who abide in love abide in God. (I John).

In my Father's house are many dwelling places. (John 14)

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It's been a rough week in the parish. Several members of our parish are looking death right in the eye. Some received grim news a while ago; others just recently. I can't remember a week quite like this when one grim notice followed another and another and another. In life and death we belong to God, we say. But just where *is God* at times such as these?

Death, of course, has a grip on all of us. Sometimes we feel it. Most times we don't. But at certain times there's no denying it.

News of our impending death, or the impending death of a loved one, concentrates the mind like nothing else—although our practice of daily morning prayer could and probably should include at least a brief acknowledgement and acceptance of our mortality.

Yes, I will die. Maybe today. How, then, shall I live?

Everybody and everything dies. But while we live we have the high privilege of being part of this astoundingly fabulous web of life, nearly 15 billion years in the making. It can fill our hearts with fear and dread or with joy and gratitude.

What a place! What a planet!

It has taken nearly 5 billion years for life to arise on this planet alone, emerging from simple, single cell organisms to complex organisms with as many cells as there are stars in the heavens. The power behind or within it all seems not to coerce as much as coax. It seems to create conditions that allow life to transform itself—if *chances are taken*.

By looking back through deep time we can now say that this mysterious power seems to favor more and more diversity, more and more inclusivity, more and more spaciousness, more and more consciousness, more and more freedom, more and more risk, more and more, wider and wider community. It's true: we might detect a trend but not even heaven knows how it will turn out.

Quirkiness and unpredictability are built right into the molecular structure of reality. But one thing is not unpredictable and that is death. Death is built into the whole enterprise, too. Everybody and everything dies.

However, in the meantime the world beckons us to look up, look down, look in and all around at awesome and terrifying beauty. Behold it is good, not perfect, but good and, yes, incomplete. Just like you and me. Good, not perfect. Incomplete.

Behold the world. Behold yourself. As John Calvin put it: the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self are nearly one and the same.

The Great Ancestors recognized something about humans that was simply divine. It became apparent to them that humans possessed enormous potential to create and destroy like no other species on earth. Eventually they began to ask: *knowing what we know, how, then, shall we live?* Well, some said, why not use our abilities and opportunities to create. Let's create something beautiful in our own way, in our own time and place. And that's what humans have done and are doing.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord. My soul long and yearns and pines to be in your presence. (Psalm 84)

At one time God's dwelling place meant cathedrals like Solomon's Temple—an architectural and engineering marvel featuring cedars of Lebanon, gold, silver, ornate fabrics, rubies, marble and topped by a gold plated roof. Does God dwell in temples, shrines and cathedrals? Only one?

We now know that there are and have been many, many millions of such stupendous structures like Solomon's Temple designed and built by human ingenuity—not to mention bridges, tunnels, aqueducts, train tracks, ships, planes, vaccines, artificial hearts, flutes, pianos, and music itself plus paintings, sculpture, poetry and so, so much more.

Does human imagination and inventions embody the divine?

How lovely are your dwelling places, O Lord. And yet no place or thing can contain God.

At Bryce Canyon Paula and I gazed through powerful telescopes into the dark sky filled with countless stars. For tens of thousands of years those tiny spots of light have inspired human imagination to weave a million tales. We heard a few Native American star tales from the dark ranger at Bryce; you heard one from Paula last Sunday about Coyote and the stars.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord. And yet we suspect that not even the universe can contain God.

The day after Bryce we stood gazing into and across the huge expanse of the Grand Canyon, a spectacle carved by sun, wind and water over millions of years and still changing by the minute. In canyon is incomplete. The canyon's rocks, flora and fauna manifest fearsome power and beauty. And, to think, that particular canyon, like a particular swan or black bear or grasshopper, is but one of thousands upon thousands of natural wonders on this planet.

How lovely are your dwelling places, O Lord. And yet...

This past week I saw movie: *Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, a parable inspired by the Holocaust. It's a parable; not a factual story.

Bruno, the nine-year-old son of a Nazi commandant had been moved from Berlin to Poland with his family, a long way from his chums. Bruno was starving for companionship. One day he wandered outside the walls of the commandant's country estate. He trekked through woods, across a stream and discovered a boy dressed in a striped uniform, sitting forlornly behind a barb wired fence. Neither boy comprehended

what was going on in that concentration camp, nor what the billows of foul smelling smoke meant.

Within days Bruno and Shmuel became fast and secret friends. One day Shmuel's father inexplicably disappeared from camp. Bruno promised to help Shmuel find his father. So he crawled under the wire into the camp, discarded his clothes, put on what he thought was a cool striped uniform and began searching barracks and alleys only to be herded into a procession bound for the so-called showers. Not knowing their fate, Bruno and Shmuel nonetheless walked hand in hand into the gas chamber—designed and built by human ingenuity.

Where is God at such times and places?

How lovely are your dwelling places, O Lord.

Our own Harriet Arthur died this past month. In early 1992 she loaded her stroke-stricken, beloved husband into her car and drove to Hagerstown where she learned the grim results of a mammogram. On the way home her car overheated. She pulled to the side of the road. It was one of the darkest days of her life. Here I was, she said, with a broken down car, a broken down husband and a broken down me!

A stranger stopped and arranged for her car to be towed to Bill Trail's service station in Shepherdstown. A few days later a neighbor took her to claim the car. *How much*, she asked Mr. Trails. *Five hundred dollars*, he said. Well, for someone trying to stretch dollars in those tough times, that was a large sum. Nevertheless, she began writing a check.

Don't do that, said Bill. *You don't have to pay.*

I don't? Why not?

It's already been paid?

Really?! By whom?

Let's just say, said Bill, *that you have many friends in this town.*

When Harriet told that story, she'd say: *that was the good news. My debt had been paid.* The bad news, she'd say, was that from then on *I had to be nice to everybody in Shepherdstown!*

Well, if I'm not mistaken, that's pretty much the entire Christian gospel in a nutshell: *Your debt's been paid. Get over it. Be kind to everybody!*

How lovely are your dwelling places, O Lord.

Where does God dwell? Jesus said, In my father's house are many dwelling places. God is love. Those who dwell in love, dwell in God and God dwells in them.

My friends, please love on another. Life is too short for anything less.