

A HOME FOR THE LORD

Rev. Mary Barrett Speers
Exodus 34:29-32; Matthew 17:1-9

This last Sunday in February, let's go back long, long ago in African history, to ancient Egypt. I'm remembering an exhibition I saw a few years ago, called "To Live Forever."

What was interesting about it was the anthropology of it: the why and how of Egyptian funerary culture, from the stone and gold and jewels of the wealthy (that's what we think of, usually) to the more ephemeral wood and fabrics of the poor—the real treasures, if you ask me, for fragile as they are, and not protected in impressive tombs, they are nevertheless here, all this time later.

Now perhaps you're thinking, "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: the Egyptian wing used to be a kind of dusty, desertish beige, all of it, and deserted, as well.

Well, all the old familiar pieces were still there, but fresh and new, with a thick green carpet, like the banks of the Nile, a lush lawn underfoot, instead of the cold, hard terrazzo there had been before, and colors and light everywhere, and suddenly, back then, I realized the ancient Egyptians weren't obsessed with death at all: on the contrary, all this 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 celebrate every detail, 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 even though they've been preserved, 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; so it stands to reason that's what we dig up. That's how anything from that long ago has survived, and in that sense, it has even lived forever, or as one 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 (that's the Greek word), 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—putting down 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 and worship

the past; but rather, get yourself down the mountain and *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 make 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 shelters is a very human impulse. In fact, in Judaism 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 even God's "house" was a tent.

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, dusty as it was (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 coxswain sitting at the back, just like my father's stories about rowing in school.

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*. Well, you've seen it, some of you.

There was nothing lacking, between my grandmother and my mother—just think of all those birthdays and Christmases before I was even born. So by the time it came to me, it was completely full, completely finished, with no room left for anything from any more little girls. I have it still, but the dollhouse I actually played with was the one my father made, and it is *still* unfinished, and another little girl is making things for it now: and so far, there is still room in it for *her* little girls to make things for it in the future, too.

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*. Jesus didn't call us to mummify our faith, but to *live* it.

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, well, 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 as you know from Tuesday morning Bible study, 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 live 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, literally in Greek, *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—so that all Jesus' "sheep that we know not of" have a place to shelter and feel safe.

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

That's right, it's your heart!

Well, okay, that's cute, 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, well, it's *finished*, in both senses of that word—think of sand castles on the beach: if it's finished, it's 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. You're more alive, extending yourself, taking risks. Doesn't sound right, does it, but that's what they say. It's *building*, not resting on our laurels, not snuggling in, and certainly not *preserving*, that really 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 roomier our hearts will be, and the more homes our hearts will find, in all the other hearts we meet. Don't forget that in the Bible, you think with your heart, you imagine with your heart, and your will comes from your heart, too. What a home for God we'll be, when our thoughts, our imaginations, and our wills will shine with the Light of Christ, pouring forth—with all our differences, just to keep things interesting—from each one of our hearts!

So, this Lent, I invite you to a faith that's alive, and portable, and indeed many-mansioned, filled with many dwelling-places, beginning this Wednesday, this very week, because—as you walk your Lenten journey, you'll be making a home in your heart for the Lord. And, once you are walking your walk, if you carry that heart *down* the mountain—why, everyone around you will be transfigured as well.

AMEN.