



April 27, 2021

Recognizing Sacred Space

By The Rev. Susan D. Parsons

As a young girl in the depths of a particularly glacial Oklahoma winter, I read *The Secret Garden*, a classic of children's literature. Before I read the last page, I knew I had to have a secret garden for myself. But where? Houses in our neighborhood didn't have fences between them, much less walls, or even a substantial shrub.

Nevertheless, when spring finally arrived, I found an almost secret spot in the narrow space between our house and the neighbor's, a spot completely unbothered except for those occasions when my dad needed to mow the lawn. As a bonus, the air conditioning unit was there – another wall! It was the closest I could get to a secret garden, and it worked.

Not much would grow in my secret garden – shady as it was – but the mint I planted flourished. The scent of it and my ability to nibble its leaves made it a perfect foundation plant to go with the other unidentified greenery that managed to grow there.

What was most important, though, was the space. It was mine, shared only with God. I went there to talk to God, to think things through, to cry, to be alone, to simply be. Over the days, I filled my secret garden with small treasures – important, lovely stones I found; tiny flowers; interesting seeds. They were all meant to enhance this quiet, comforting space.

This was my sacred space, and not the church we attended, or my room, or anywhere else.

Other homes and places came to be sacred to me, of course. Some were obvious – cathedrals, museums, and churches. Others were surprising like the desert of the Southwest, and some are more enduring, such as the churches where I served. And always, there has been a space in my home or outside where I go to sit with God, and mint is still a foundation plant.

I imagine almost all of us have a sacred space in our homes, though we may not recognize it as holy. Maybe it's as simple as a picture or two on a dresser, or a place where we always sit to read scripture, say prayers, give thanks, cry, or find comfort.

These places are profoundly important because they become a place where our Spirit shifts to another space and time, a place where we experience God, and where we are fed with the mystery and peace of God. They are also a space of comfort, blessing, and sometimes a call to get moving, a place to remember God's presence, not just in our homes, but deep in our souls.

Once we recognize a sacred space in our homes, the easier it is to imagine God with us while we are sitting on the sofa, snoozing in the good chair in the living room on Sunday afternoons, or walking in the garden.

A sacred space strengthens the need we have to remember God's eternal presence deep within and without, even in the messiness of our lives. However grand or humble, the passions, the conversations, the everydayness of our houses are sacred, holy, and blessed. Yes, sacred, holy, and blessed – even with the disarray, some dirt, and whatever it is the cat dragged in.

A sense of the holy in our homes may be even more “alive” and present now that we are worshipping in this wild, new “Church of the Ethereal” via YouTube and Zoom. Our homes have become sacred simply because they are joined with the church and each other in the Spirit. It is that Spirit who flows through us all, despite our separation, connecting us effortlessly in worship as the body of Christ.

Our recognition of sacred space might have its roots in the story of Jacob in the Book of Genesis which I’m sharing right below. Jacob stays at a place for the night and the Lord appears to him in a dream and repeats promises to him that the Lord made to Abraham, Jacob’s ancestor. In Jacob’s dream, the Lord promises to be with Jacob wherever he goes and to keep him safe. Jacob wakes up and recognizes this place where he slept and where the Lord appeared to him as a sacred space. He calls it “Bethel” which means “house of God.”

Jacob left Beer-sheba ... [and] 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. Genesis 28:10-19

Like Jacob, we, too, can recognize and name sacred space that helps us experience and remember God's presence in our life and in our soul.