

## Making Space for God

Psalm 118:1-9, 21-26 & 2 Corinthians 3:1-18

*Fourth Sunday of Easter/13<sup>th</sup> April 2008*

The novelist Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) recalled a childhood experience that came to define his life. “Now when I was a little chap,” he remembered, “I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, ‘When I grow up I will go there.’” Later, Conrad would go to the blank space that became known as the Belgian Congo and write about that harrowing experience in *The Heart of Darkness* in 1899.

That was me as a boy. I’ve always loved maps and spent hours pouring over them, wondering about unknown places. “When I grow up I will go there.” That’s how I felt about going to Europe and Africa. I came across Conrad’s story just as I was about to embark on a journey to Kenya twelve years ago. I found a kindred spirit. I’ve always been a map person. If you haven’t had a chance to visit the marvelous exhibit on maps at the Walters Gallery, entitled, “Maps: Finding Our Place in the World,” do yourself a favor and spend a couple of hours there.

What pulls or attracts us, what fascinates and calls us to explore is a sense of the unknown, the unfamiliar. While the unfamiliar and unknown might generate anxiety and trepidation in us, we have to confess that there is no growth in knowledge without acknowledging that we know not, we cannot understand without knowing that we do not yet fully understand, there’s still more to discover and experience. These empty, open, blank spaces in our knowledge, in our lives and experiences, these uncharted places summon us, beckon us to acknowledge them, to face them, and enter them, if we dare, in order to discover something new, thus yielding experiences, new ideas, which eventually make us into new people. These experiences, these journeys change us, *transform* us.

That’s what it’s like in Christ, isn’t? When we’re walking with him, we are constantly being changed. He’s taking us where we need to go, ever down new roads. When Paul uses such lofty language here – “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to the another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” – he’s expressing the Christian belief that we’re on a journey that begins at our baptism. The notion of the Christian as pilgrim might sound cliché and quaint, but it’s true. We are pilgrims and explorers who, because of the resurrection, now head off on an adventure of a lifetime – and then some. Perhaps this is why George Macleod (1895-1991) of the Iona Community said decades ago, “Christians are *explorers*, not map makers.”<sup>1</sup> What we’re looking for, “is not down in any map,” said Herman Melville (1819-1891), “true places never are.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From a sermon given in 1955, cited in Ron Ferguson, ed., *Daily Readings with George Macleod* (London: Fount, 1991), 115.

<sup>2</sup> From *Moby Dick* (1851).

Sure, Christ accepts us in grace but then through grace takes us where we need to go. Sure, Christ loves us and forgives our sin but loves us so much to never leave us there. He takes us by the hand and leads us. Or, to use Paul's image here: Jesus looks us in the face, and when we see who we are from his perspective, when we see our true reflection in his face, the more clearly we see who we are in him, we discover that our self-perception does change, that we are being changed, transformed from one way of being to another. *When we're in Christ and Christ is in us, we go places we would never dream of going, we do things we would never dream of doing, we dare to accomplish things we would have earlier considered impractical. We discover that God isn't through with us yet and that anything is possible.*

This journey, this spirit of exploration, requires "blank spaces" on the map of our lives, or blank, uncharted open spaces in our hearts, or in our schedules. I'm convinced that in order for us to discover where we need to go, to discern where we need to grow, where we need to be challenged, we need empty spaces, vast, broad (Psalm 118:5), blank spaces to fire our imaginations. We need to *allow* for the space, create the space so that something new can happen to us – and what that is we cannot predict or control.<sup>3</sup>

The problem is, however, just about every inch of this planet (and a good portion of the universe, not all of it, but a lot of it) has now been mapped; the only uncharted places left are the depths of the ocean floor and the deep interior regions of the human heart or psyche. So much of our lives are not empty, there's very little blank space left in our calendars, every moment of our lives are planned and accounted for. We've become human doings, instead of human beings. Activities keep us busy but at a tremendous cost. Even moments of silence, empty space, are rare – silence is swallowed up by noise, constant low-grade static. There's little space left for ourselves, let alone anyone else – and not a lot of space for God.

As I shared in *The Messenger*, throughout the sabbatical I'm hoping to make space in my schedule and my heart, my mind, and my soul for God. I'm immensely grateful to you for giving me this space, to listen more attentively to the Spirit and in those places be more open to the creative presence of God whom, I believe, isn't finished with me yet (at least I hope not). It is as T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) warned in his poem, "Ash Wednesday," words that haunt me, as do many of Eliot's words: "No place of grace for those who avoid the face./ No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice."<sup>4</sup> This is the journey that I'll be on and I ask you to pray for me.

And while I'm away, you all will be on a journey and I'll be praying for you. We'll be messing around with the physical space of this building – knocking down walls, moving doors, creating new ways to access this building. In many ways the change of this space is a way for us to make space for God, in that through these changes in the building God can do something new in us.

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<sup>3</sup> From the worship bulletin: "The purpose is not to create or make something happen, but to allow the space for it to happen." Morton T. Kelsey, *The Other Side of Silence: Meditation for the Twenty-First Century* (Paulist Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Ash Wednesday," (1930) *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p. 65.

Psychologists and architects know that the buildings we create, build, and inhabit are really external statements about *soul*, about the human spirit. What goes on “out-there” changes the way we feel “in-here,” within us. Changes “in-here” shape what we do “out-there.” In other words, our interior space changes when exterior spaces are modified. When our inner-lives experience transformation, then our outlook changes, how we present ourselves to the world changes.

What’s true for persons is true for the church. I can’t help but think that the outer change of this building will transform the way we see ourselves. Maybe the decision last week and step of faith to undergo this external change signals that something has shifted deep inside us. What’s true is that because we made a space for God to act through us, we are embarking on a new journey together that has the potential of energizing this ministry in surprising ways that we cannot even begin to imagine today.

Perhaps this is a good time in our lives, together and apart over the next four months as we undergo change and adjustment, to reflect upon how much space we allot to God in our lives? What if we made more space in our hearts and schedules for God, more space within our families, friends, and loved ones for God, more space in the life of the church for God? Imagine what God could accomplish through us.

Opening up space is ultimately opening us up to new possibilities and experiences, to discover something new about God, ourselves, and each other. Opening up space allows something new and creative to take place, it allows God to do something new with us, it allows for transformation to occur. What is the Christian life, if not all about transformation and change? It’s all part of the great adventure of following Christ, of being explorers in the Spirit, venturing toward new horizons, and not being afraid to step out even if we don’t have a map plotting out every step of the way. The German medieval mystic Meister Eckhart (c. 1260 – c. 1328) once challenged Christians to, “Go forth without a way,” because “[w]hoever is seeking God by ways is finding ways and losing God, who in ways is hidden.”<sup>5</sup> What if we substituted “map” into this quote: *Go forth without a map, because whoever is seeking God by maps is finding maps and losing God, who in maps is hidden.* When we’re finished exploring, then we can draw up the map. In the meantime, we have a journey to experience together and new spaces to explore, so with boldness, let us step out.

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man From Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 115.