



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister  
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## “Hearts in Holy Places”

© by Myrna Adams West, Lay Minister

A sermon delivered on November 29, 2015

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*We touch the floor to remember that wherever we bring our best self is holy ground.*

Lisa Friedman

*The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness  
and the world's deep hunger meet.* Frederick Buechner

*The idea of a sacred place...is apparently as old as life itself.* Joseph Campbell

### Sermon

The little town of Bethlehem in Judea already held some importance before a young couple from another small Palestinian village called Nazareth arrived to register for Caesar Augustus' counting of the Jewish population more than 2,000 years ago. Bethlehem was the hometown of Israel's most beloved king—David. There are claims dating to the 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE that the tombs of several prominent figures from Israel's history are buried nearby: King David (himself), the Prophet Ezekiel, the long-suffering Job, David's father Jesse, and David's son Solomon, among them. But it was the birth of Mary and Joseph's baby that put Bethlehem “on the map,” so to speak. The story of their search for a warm, safe place to spend the night and where Mary could give birth spread Bethlehem's fame around the Mediterranean area. So that by the 4<sup>th</sup> Century of the Common Era, Empress Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine the Great, is reported to have promoted the construction of the first Church of the Nativity. Over the course of its history, Bethlehem has been sacked, rebuilt and/or occupied by Romans, Samaritans, Persians, Muslims, Ottomans, Christians, Egyptians and others. No doubt, Bethlehem's importance—and its holiness—stems from its association with the Jewish kings and prophets found in Christian, Hebrew and Islamic scripture.

But Bethlehem is only one of many holy places around the world. Some, of course, are related to various religions, not just Bethlehem, but the Temple in Jerusalem, the city of Rome, Vatican City and Mecca. There are cathedrals, such as Chartres in France and the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. There are churches, synagogues, mosques and temples in almost every town and city around the world. There are ancient ruins and mysteries like Stonehenge, the Egyptian pyramids, or the Aztec/Toltec/Mayan pyramids in Central America.

There are cemeteries, such as Arlington National Cemetery where many of our prominent national heroes are buried, and smaller cemeteries on church and civic and private property where local heroes and their families are buried. There are burial grounds associated with Native American Tribes and other ethnic groups. And there are battlefields that have become burial grounds—Chickamauga, Gettysburg, Flander’s Field. These are all considered holy or “sacred,” a word of similar though not exact meaning.

And there are memorials along roadsides where lives lost in auto accidents are commemorated, and there are memorials for large numbers of people who were victims of bombings, massacres and other acts of war: Little Big Horn in Montana, which now also commemorates the Native Tribes whose way of life was lost despite their triumph in what is known as Custer’s Last Stand; *The USS Arizona* at Pearl Harbor; the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.; the National 9-11 Museum in New York City—these are just a few of the more familiar ones—considered holy places by those who mourn.

There are also natural areas that are considered holy or sacred—Wikipedia lists 14 sacred rivers around the world, including the Ganges in India and the Jordan River in the mid-East. National Geographic Traveler—on the web—lists 10 sacred mountains. The ones I found most familiar are The Black Hills of South Dakota; Mount Fuji, Japan; Mount Everest, on the border between Nepal and China; Mount Nebo, Jordan; Mount Olympus, Greece; and Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.

Let me pause here to share with you what I mean by “holy.” I mean, as I said to the children, “special.” A place that is “holy” is a place that is “special.” It means more than itself. It has metaphorical as well as a literal meaning.

The physical attributes of many of the places I have mentioned are at least a part of what makes them holy. But it is also the associations that we have with those places that make them holy—our experiences there or the experiences of those who were born there, live there, are buried there, who fought there or died there.

Such is the case, of course, with Bethlehem in Judea, but not every holy place is as famous as Bethlehem.

And “holiness,” like “beauty,” may be in the eye of the beholder.

Many of you know already that Herb and I live in the house I grew up in. Before my father bought it and the farm on which it sits in the mid-1930s, his brother, Lester, and Lester’s wife and three sons were already living there. After Daddy married Mama, they moved in with Uncle Lester, Aunt Minnie and James, Gene and Armell. Later Lester and his family moved to another house in Watkinsville, and Daddy’s father, mother and sister, Laura, moved into the farmhouse with Mama and Daddy and my older siblings. Before Daddy bought that property, people unrelated to us lived there and built the frame house. Before them members of the Cherokee and Creek tribes roamed, lived and hunted on that land. We know that because my brothers found arrowheads and other evidence of their presence when they plowed the fields in the 1950s and 1960s. My father’s family is descended from the Cherokee who lived in North Georgia and intermarried with the Scots-Irish who moved into the Appalachian Mountains near Hiawassee, Georgia. Today I walk on ground

that my ancestors walked on, and I sleep in rooms where my ancestors slept. For me that farm and that house are holy ground—the ground upon which my ancestors walked and slept and hunted and farmed.

My brother, Fred, is a Vietnam Vet. Most of you remember that era—that war that was not called a war, that time of tremendous upheaval in the U.S., that time when our veterans were not considered heroes but were often called “traitors” and “baby killers.” Thank goodness that has changed. While I was at Tift College, Fred was in Vietnam. He served two nine-month terms as a Seabee. He was stationed near Danang on the other side of the mountain from China Beach. Yes, that China Beach some of you may remember from the 1990s TV drama.

When he returned home to the holy ground of our farm, he didn’t talk much about his experiences. He was not a foot soldier; he was a builder of bunkers and air strips and whatever else was needed, but he and his company were nevertheless in danger. They suffered from the heat and the cold; the ever-present sand fleas; the separation from family; the fear of death by bombs that could either fall directly on their camp or be brought into camp by an innocent-looking Vietnamese citizen, or by hidden mines that could be struck by a truck or jeep tire as they traveled the roads. Some of the Seabees, my brother included, suffered from malaria and continued to suffer from relapses for years after their return home. Miraculously, only one in his company—over the two tours—was killed while in Vietnam, but tragically, within a year of returning to the states, several were killed in auto accidents.

These many years later, some are experiencing the effects of Agent Orange, which was sprayed on the jungle nearby. Many, like my brother, have bladder cancer, other cancers and diabetes or other diseases that are now thought to be directly related to that horrible chemical.

Within the last ten years, Fred has finally been able to talk beyond clichés about his Vietnam experiences. I think that’s because he has begun to reunite with his Seabee Buddies, as he calls them. They get together about once a year in Branson, Missouri. They talk about the Vietnam days, catch up on each others’ families, tell tall tales, enjoy a few shows, mourn the loss of their absent buddies and heal. None of them considers Danang or any part of Vietnam to be holy ground, but whenever they are together—wherever they are together—IS holy ground. Their hearts are in a holy place because they are together and their togetherness brings healing.

There are many heartbreaking stories of hearts in holy places as we learn of the experiences of those in Paris and Brussels and elsewhere caught in this terrible time of terrorist bombings. One that touched me deeply is of the young man who lived near one of the places in Paris that was attacked earlier this month. He was in his apartment during the attack. Afterward, he looked out his window and saw the dead and dying in the street. Realizing that there were not enough medics to care for them all, he left the safety of his home and went down to the street where he did the only thing he could do. He had no medical skills to offer, but believing that they should not die alone, he sat with the dying, offering comfort and company in their last moments.

The Syrian refugees—as have all refugees throughout the ages—have left behind their holy ground to flee to safer territory. Christine Anderson’s story about the refugees is making the rounds on Face Book. Christine is from McMinnville, Oregon, but right now she’s in Athens,

Greece, meeting boats as they come in carrying refugees. Christine and others greet the refugees and give them baby and child carriers. Here's one of Christine's stories, this one posted on November 21:

I was very emotional at the 10pm ferry tonight. I [was] tired and hungry but we went to meet it anyway. The first families came off the boats and came to sit and regroup and we walked up and calmly showed them we had baby carriers. We fit a baby on mama in a small carrier. Someone [tapped] me on the shoulder and [asked] for a carrier for a toddler. [As I fit] this carrier[,] . . . I realize[d] this is a family. A mother, father and four young children. [As I hold] both the younger children[,] . . . they hold on to me for life. I put one of them down and squat[ted] down next to the children and the mom. I [held] my hand out for the toddler and he jump[ed] into me. I yell[ed], "You are safe, you have made it to Europe, we love you, you are welcome here." The father explain[ed] in limited English that they are from Syria[,] he has four children. [He taught] me their names as though the world was still and none of the chaos around us was happening. The toddler smile[d], jump[ed] into my arms and [gave] me a big hug and a "thank you" in English. I put the toddler on the father['s] back in an Ergo [carrier]. The moment I released the weight of the child and the child [settled] properly in the Ergo, the father realize[d] that it is not a struggle to hold his toddler. He look[ed] at me and [said], "relief." He now has attention to put on his other children. The mother embrace[d] me and thank[ed] me as my emotional floodgates open[ed]. I left that family in tears. They deserved that love, care and respect from a stranger.

Christine Anderson created a holy place on the shores of the Aegean Sea that night, a special place of safety and care, warmth and peace for a family looking for a place to rest together—if only for a little while.

Christine ended her post with the following words:

I told the father America is rooting for him. I hope we are. Let's not let this family down, let's cheer them on as they head for a brighter future, one where we change the repetition of history and realize we are all a part of the human experience. My human experience chooses love.

This is my hope for the future of us all: That we may create a holy place where all hearts may be blessed with love. May it be so.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Is there a place(s) in your life that you consider "holy"? What do you associate with that place? Why? What makes it holy to you?
2. Describe a place from your childhood that held you in awe or inspired you or delighted you or seemed to you to be holy or magical. Have you returned to that place as an adult? Did it retain its holiness? Why or why not?
3. Where do you meet the holy? Why?