

WHEN WADE CALLED ME A FEW DAYS AGO TO SAY THAT SR. BERNADETTE HAD DIED IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE HE WAS TALKING ABOUT THE NEED TO CREATE A MEMORIAL SPACE FOR HER IN OUR WORSHIP SERVICE

– NOT JUST A TIME TO REMEMBER HER – BUT A PHYSICAL REMINDER OF HER PRESENCE – A CLOTH FROM GHANA – A PICTURE OF HER LOVING FACE – A CANDLE TO REMIND US OF THE WAY HER SPIRIT LIVES ON IN THOSE WHO LOVE HER – CANDLES TO KINDLE A FLAME OF HOPE FOR THE CHILDREN SHE HAS LEFT BEHIND.

OFTEN WHEN WE HAVE MEMORIAL SERVICES AT THE CHURCH FOLKS WILL WANT TO PLACE ON THE COMMUNION TABLE OBJECTS THAT REMIND THEM OF THEIR LOVED ONES – A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT THEY PLAYED – A HAT THEY ALWAYS WORE -- A PIECE OF SPORTS EQUIPMENT – OR MY PERSONAL FAVOURITE -- THE BAG OF CHIPS THAT WE HAD UP HERE FOR ARTJONES.

WHEN THE PHYSICAL PRESENCE OF A LOVED ONE IS NO LONGER PRESENT – WE LONG FOR SOMETHING TANGIBLE TO HOLD ON TO -- TO REMIND US OF THEIR PRESENCE – TO TETHER THEM TO THIS OUR EARTHLY WORLD.

AND ITS NOT JUST PHYSICAL REMINDERS THAT HELP US – THERE'S PHYSICAL ACTIONS THAT HELP US TO REMEMBER AS WELL – ACTIONS LIKE PLACING FLOWERS ON A GRAVESITE – OR LIGHTING A CANDLE.

TIMES AND PLACES OF DEATH ARE AMONG THE MOST HOLY TIMES AND PLACES WE EXPERIENCE ON EARTH – BECAUSE THEY REMIND US OF THE THINNESS OF THE VEIL THAT EXISTS BETWEEN OUR EARTHLY REALM AND THE HEAVENLY REALM -- THEY ARE OFTEN A POINT OF CONTACT WITH THE DIVINE – FOLKS WHO DON'T GIVE GOD A SECOND THOUGHT FROM DAY TO DAY – WILL SUDDENLY FIND THEMSELVES PONDERING GOD'S EXISTENCE DURING A TIME OF GRIEF—OR BLESSED WITH A DEEPLY SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE.

WITHIN EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US THERE IS A PRIMAL NEED FOR SACRED RITUAL – FOR SACRED OBJECTS AND FOR SACRED SPACE AND FOR SACRED LANGUAGE-- THINGS TO REMIND US NOT ONLY OF THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE AFTER IT IS GONE

– BUT ALSO TO REMIND US OF THE SANCTITY OF LIFE ITSELF – THE PRESENCE OF THE DIVINE MYSTERY WHICH DWELLS IN EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US – AND WITHIN WHICH WE EACH DWELL.

WE NEED SACRED RITUAL, OBJECT AND SPACE – NOT ONLY WHEN SOMEONE DIES – BUT PERHAPS MORE IMPORTANTLY – ALTHOUGH WE OFTEN FORGET IT -- AS WE STRIVE TO LIVE OUT OF THE SACREDNESS IN WHICH WE WERE ALL CREATED IN OUR DAY TO DAY LIVES.

FOR THE HEBREW PEOPLE THIS NEED FOR SACRED SPACE AND OBJECT BECAME QUITE PRONOUNCED AFTER MOSES HAD LED THEM OUT OF SLAVERY IN EYGPPT AND THEY SUDDENLY FOUND THEMSELVES WANDERING AROUND IN THE DESERT LOOKING FOR THE PROMISED LAND.

AND SO AS WE HEARD IN TODAY'S SCRIPTURE READING FROM THE BOOK OF EXODUS – THE DIRECTIVE WAS GIVEN THROUGH MOSES TO THE PEOPLE FROM GOD – TO CREATE A SACRED SPACE – A PLACE IN THE MIDST OF THE WILDERNESS WHERE GOD'S PRESENCE COULD BE MADE KNOWN TO THE PEOPLE AND WHERE THE PEOPLE COULD REMEMBER THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND BUILD UPON THAT RELATIONSHIP.

THE HOUSE THAT WAS TO BE BUILT--NEEDED TO BE A MOVEABLE HOUSE – A TENT ACTUALLY – AND THE MOST SACRED OBJECTS THAT GOD COMMANDED THE PEOPLE TO PUT IN THIS TENT OF MEETING WOULD NEED TO BE CARRIED IN SPECIAL CONTAINER – A CONTAINER WHICH WAS CALLED THE ARK OF THE COVENANT.

NOW IN ADDITION TO BEING A PLACE TO CONTAIN AND EXPERIENCE THE PRESENCE OF GOD – THIS TENT OF MEETING AND THE ARK OF THE COVENANT AND THE RITUALS THAT WERE PERFORMED THERE-- REALLY BECAME WHAT SHAPED AND FORMED THIS NOMADIC PEOPLE INTO A COMMUNITY

– OUT THERE IN THE WILDERNESS THE ISRAELITES WERE PERIODICALLY EXPOSED TO THE GODS FROM OTHER TRIBES – AND SO THE NEED DEVELOPED TO HELP THEM SHAPE AND FORM THEIR OWN IDENTITY.

ALTHOUGH THERE IS SOME UNCERTAINTY AMONG BIBLICAL SCHOLARS EXACTLY WHICH ITEMS WERE PLACED IN THE ARK OF THE COVENANT –

THERE IS AGREEMENT THAT THE MOST IMPORTANT ITEM THE ARK HELD WAS THE STONE TABLETS UPON WHICH MOSES IS SAID TO HAVE WRITTEN THE 10 COMMANDMENTS.

LISTEN TO THE WORDS USED WITH OUR CHILDREN TO TALK ABOUT THESE SACRED OBJECTS:

“WHEN GOD GAVE THE PEOPLE THE 10 BEST WAYS TO LIVE, THEY LOVED THEM SO MUCH THAT THEY WANTED TO HAVE THEM ALWAYS WITH THEM. GOD TOLD THEM TO BUILD A BOX CALLED AN ARK TO KEEP THEM IN AND TO COVER THE ARK WITH GOLD. IT HAD POLES ON THE SIDES, SO THAT PEOPLE COULD ALWAYS CARRY IT WITH THEM WHEREVER THEY WENT”

THE OTHER OBJECTS THAT SOME SCHOLARS BELIEVE WAS IN THE SACRED BOX INCLUDED A JAR OF THE MANNA GOD FED THE PEOPLE WITH IN THE DESERT AS A REMINDER OF GOD’S GRACIOUS PROVISION FOR THEIR LIVES – AND THE BUDDING ROD OF AARON – WHICH SIGNIFIED GOD’S APPOINTMENT OF AARON AS A LEADER AMONG THE PEOPLE AND A REMINDER TO THE PEOPLE TO HUMBLE THEMSELVES BEFORE GOD AND GOD’S DIRECTION IN THEIR LIVES.

THEN THERE WERE THE SACRED OBJECTS IN THE TENT OF MEETING-- THEY PROVIDED A PLACE TO RITUALIZE THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD – THEY INCLUDED AMONG OTHER THINGS -- A 7 BRANCHED LAMPSTEAD TO SYMBOLIZE GOD’S NEVER-ENDING PRESENCE; 12 LOAVES OF UNLEAVENED BREAD TO REPRESENT THE 12 TRIBES OF ISRAEL AND THEIR DELIVERANCE

FROM SLAVERY IN EGYPT; AN ALTAR OF INCENSE FOR LIFTING PRAYERS TO GOD AND A PLACE FOR MAKING OFFERINGS.

SO THE COMMUNITY OF THE HEBREW PEOPLE ESSENTIALLY BECAME IDENTIFIED THROUGH THE WAY THEY LIVED THEIR LIVES – ACCORDING TO THE 10 COMMANDMENTS – AND THE RELATIONSHIP THEY HAD WITH GOD – WHO WAS FOR THEM IN CONTRAST TO MANY OTHER TRIBES AT THAT TIME AND FOR US TODAY -- ONE GOD.

THROUGH THE WORK THAT WE'VE BEEN ENGAGED IN AS A CONGREGATION THESE PAST FEW MONTHS -- FIRST WITH THE FEASIBILITY STUDY WE HAD ROB WALLER COMPLETE FOR US AND IN THE WEEKS TO COME IN THE STRATEGIC PLANNING DOCUMENT WE ARE CREATING – WE AS A CONGREGATION ARE PONDERING THE WAYS THAT WE IDENTIFY OURSELVES – BOTH WITHIN OUR COMMUNITY OF FAITH AND IN THE COMMUNITY BEYOND THIS ONE – WE ARE PONDERING WHAT IT MEANS FOR US TO BE MOUNT SEYMOUR UNITED CHURCH.

AS A WAY TO HELP US TO UNDERSTAND WHO WE ARE AND WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO AND WHAT IT IS GOD IS CALLING US TO IN THE FUTURE – WE ARE GOING TO BE MINING THE STORIES OF THE HEBREW PEOPLE FOR SOME CLUES ABOUT OUR OWN IDENTITY AND OUR OWN RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

THE CHILDREN ARE GOING TO BE EXPERIENCING THOSE STORIES THROUGH GODLY PLAY -- AND WE ARE GOING TO BE EXPERIENCING THE STORIES AS WE HAVE TODAY THROUGH WORSHIP.

THE STORY OF THE NEED THE HEBREW PEOPLE HAD TO DEVELOP THEIR SENSE OF IDENTITY THROUGH SACRED OBJECTS AND RITUALS – THE NEED THEY HAD TO BOTH REMEMBER THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND BUILD UPON THAT RELATIONSHIP – HAS LOTS TO SAY TO US IN OUR CURRENT CONTEXT.

WE LIVE IN A TIME WHEN THERE IS A GREAT DEAL OF INDIVIDUALISM – AND THERE IS MUCH ABOUT THAT TO CELEBRATE. MANY PEOPLE WOULD SAY THAT THEY WORSHIP GOD IN THEIR OWN WAY – IN THEIR OWN SETTING.

MANY PEOPLE HAVE CREATED VERY INTENTIONAL SACRED SPACES WITHIN THEIR OWN HOMES – PLACES WITH OBJECTS THAT HAVE SACRED MEANING FOR THEM -- PLACES THAT HELP THEM FOCUS ON THE HOLY IN THEIR LIVES – PLACES FOR PRAYER AND MEDITATION. (I'M SURE THAT THERE'S LOTS OF US HERE THIS MORNING WHO HAVE CREATED THESE KINDS OF PLACES IN OUR HOMES)

MANY PEOPLE HAVE SACRED SPACES – OTHER THAN RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS THAT THEY GO TO ON A REGULAR BASIS TO CONNECT WITH GOD – THE BEACH – THE WOODS – THE MOUNTAINS – AN ART GALLERY. (LOTS OF US HERE HAVE THOSE KINDS OF PLACES IN OUR LIVES)

BUT THERE CONTINUES TO BE A NEED IN OUR SOCIETY FOR PEOPLE TO GATHER IN COMMUNITY – TO SHARE WITH EACH OTHER COMMON SACRED STORIES – COMMON LANGUAGE – COMMON MUSIC – COMMON OBJECTS AND COMMON RITUALS WHICH SHAPE AND FORM OUR CORE IDENTITY – THAT REMIND US OF WHO GOD IS AND WHO WE ARE – THERE CONTINUES TO BE A NEED IN OUR SOCIETY FOR A PLACE FOR PEOPLE TO COME HOME TO -- WHOSE SOUL'S RECOGNIZE THE CHRISTIAN PATHWAY TO GOD.

SOME OF THOSE OBJECTS AND RITUALS INCLUDE – OUR SACRED SCRIPTURES – OUR BOOK OF WISDOM—THE RITUAL OF BAPTISM -- A REMINDER OF GOD'S GRACE – THE LIGHTING OF THE CHRIST CANDLE – THE CROSS SYMBOL OF BOTH OUR HUMAN FRAILTY AND THE POWER OF LOVE TO OVERCOME THE POWER OF EVIL THE TAKING UP OF OFFERING AS A SYMBOL OF OUR GRATITUDE AND OUR COMMITMENT TO THE WORK OF PEACE AND JUSTICE IN THE WORLD – HEALING – THE MUSIC WHICH YOU CAN SING BY YOURSELF BUT JUST DOESN'T FEEL THE SAME AS WHEN WE JOIN OUR VOICES AS ONE.

WE NEED THESE OBJECTS AND RITUALS -- BECAUSE FOR US AS CHRISTIANS THEY LIFT THE VEIL BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH – THEY ARE TANGIBLE SIGNS OF GOD'S INVISIBLE PRESENCE

– AND IN THE SAME WAY THAT WHEN WE STARE INTO THE EYES OF THE PHOTO OF A LOVED ONE NOW DEPARTED – OR HANDLE AN OBJECT THAT REMINDS US OF WHO THEY WERE -- SOMETIMES WE CAN FEEL THEIR PRESENCE WITH US -- SOMETIMES WHEN WE GATHER AROUND THESE

OBJECTS AND ENGAGE IN THESE RITUALS – WE CAN FEEL AND KNOW  
THAT GOD IS HERE—AND THAT WE ARE HOME.

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AND WHEN WE ARE REMINDED THAT GOD IS HERE – SOMETIMES THAT  
HELPS US REMEMBER THAT GOD IS ALSO RIGHT HERE. (in our hearts)

IN THE WORLD WE LIVE IN IT IS EASY TO FEEL LOST – IT IS EASY TO FORGET  
WHO WE ARE – NOT JUST WHO WE ARE AS CHRISTIANS-- BUT WHO WE ARE  
AS HUMAN BEINGS – WHO WE ARE AS PLANETARY BEINGS – WE NEED  
OBJECTS AND RITUALS TO REMIND US WHO WE ARE – WE NEED RITUALS TO  
HELP US BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR TRUEST SELVES -- AND WITH THE  
DIVINE MYSTERY THAT HOLDS US ALL TOGETHER – WE NEED A PLACE TO  
COME HOME TO –AND A REMINDER THAT WHEN GOD DWELLS IN OUR HEARTS  
– WE ARE NEVER FAR FROM HOME.