

Place in the City

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[0 : 00] So in one of the first major theological studies about the topic of land and scripture, theologian Walter Brueggemann says this.

This is one of my favorite scholars, one of my favorite theologians, and I want to use this quote to ground us this evening. He says, They may be understood in terms of sociological displacement. They may be understood in terms of psychological dislocation, as increasing numbers of persons are disoriented. I love this because essentially Brueggemann diagnoses our modern condition. He wrote this about 20 years ago, but I would say to me, this feels about as true as it could be, whether it was written then or now.

And then he said something else. The Bible itself is primarily concerned with the issue of being displaced and yearning for a place.

[1 : 35] Land is central, if not the central theme of biblical faith. Now, a few years ago, the church that I formerly pastor that is merging with the Table Church, a few years ago, our launch team was trying to figure out what we would call ourselves.

And we spent a good amount of time trying to closely discern this. We landed on Resurrection City, as you know, to honor the prophetic protest against poverty on the National Mall in 1968.

But there were a ton of other names that we came up with. You know, we wanted to be cool. We were like, maybe we should be Prodigal Church, y'all. That's cool. We came up with all these different names. Some of them wonderful, some of them cringeworthy.

But I spent a lot of time in that season looking at church websites and thinking about both the theological and practical significance of naming.

And one church that stayed with me was called Belong Church. And I've seen a lot of churches take up the value of belonging as deeply worthy.

[2 : 46] It's a value here. But I've never seen it named that straightforwardly. Belong Church. When I read that, I wondered, like, is there like a demand?

You got to belong. Like, what is that? How do I think about this? But after thinking about this quote, this diagnosis about displacement in our condition, I've begun to wonder whether we as individuals in churches really know how to belong.

How does one come to belong? What creates belonging? Well, just as he gives a diagnosis, he gives an assurance, too, around what the medicine for what Elza's could be.

He says, it is rootlessness and not meaninglessness that characterizes the current crisis.

Rootlessness. There are no meanings apart from roots.

In other words, to the extent that we experience an increasing sense of homelessness, the antidote is to grow deep roots and to grow deep roots in a place.

[4 : 09] So today, we're continuing our series, Faithful Presence, and we're talking about a theology of place. And in this series, we're meditating on what place means to us as a church and as individuals.

Next March, the church is going to turn 10 years old. And there's a reason. I am sorry, y'all. Can you hear me? Okay. All right.

This is not cute, but it works. All right. So next March, y'all, the church is turning 10 years old. And there's going to be a ton of opportunity to think about, and it is now a ton of opportunity to think about, what roots have we grown?

How deep are they? How shallow? How robust? How tentative? How well-grown? How deep are we? And then even as a community that is thinking about space, looking for space in this season, thinking about what space might accommodate us, we're thinking about the sacredness of place and how that needs to be at the forefront of our minds.

Okay. So as individual disciples, too, we are also always being formed by place. We always have the possibility to be in a harmful or helpful relationship with it.

[5 : 35] Thank you. And we always can be alive to the divine possibility of place, of our neighborhoods and our blocks and our plazas. Or we can live as people who are unconcerned with a commitment to place.

Pastor Anthony started this series off by looking at the story of Jacob. One of the fathers of the faith in Genesis, who discovers really unexpectedly that surely the Lord is in this place and he did not know it.

And then he has this sudden awareness that this place is awesome. How awesome is this place, he says. This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven.

And that's the kind of gracious awakening that we all need. That the Lord is in this place in our neighborhoods. And then Topher last week reminded us of a theology of place and a theology of place always being grounded in creation.

Our understanding of God as creator and ourselves as those created in the image of God and the image of the world. So today what I want to do, I'm going to, I tend to like to talk from one passage of scripture and I'm going to teach a little bit.

[7 : 02] And namely, I want to talk about the role of the city. Because I think as a church, that if we're going to talk about place, we've got to talk about the city. And when I say the city, I don't mean that in an abstract way.

I mean that in a concrete way. So I want to talk about the city. That's what I want to do. I want to teach about it. So I'm going to give a number of different scriptures to talk about the city and why we should think about it as important.

But before I do that, I have to surface a couple of things that I think are important. A couple of temptations I think we face when we talk about the city. So one, I think that it's tempting to talk about the sacredness of time as opposed to the sacredness of place.

Time, time has been the obsession of the Western world. Western philosophers have loved to talk about the march of history and they've considered the idea of progress their kind of pet project. But when we talk about time to the detriment of place, we turn away from what happened on the actual land under our feet.

[8 : 19] We no longer remember that the American dream is the indigenous nightmare as Randy Woodley puts it. We have a tendency, even as a church, if we don't think about the place our feet, our feet actually lands to colonize.

We'll do that if we don't talk well about place. And then in order to embody justice in light of forces such as gentrification, we have to talk about place and we have to talk about it well.

But it's hard. It's tempting to talk about time. But it's also tempting to talk about space instead of place. Here's another quote from Brueggemann.

A sense of place is to be sharply distinguished from a sense of space. Space means an arena of freedom without coercion or accountability, free of pressures and void of authority.

Space may be imaged as a weekend holiday, an avocation, and is characterized by neutrality or emptiness waiting to be filled by our choosing.

[9 : 33] But place is a very different matter. Place is space that has historical meanings where some things have happened that are now remembered and that provide continuity and identity across generations.

Place is space in which important words have been spoken, that have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny. Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued.

I'll hear this. Place is indeed a protest against the unpromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom.

place entails the rootedness of commitment. It is charged with meanings that we don't give it ourselves.

Whereas we create space in our own image, place creates us. And then, when we talk about place, there's one more temptation I just have to name.

[10 : 51] And that's to relate to place is only a metaphor. To talk about it is only an abstraction. It's just an idea in our heads. We don't talk about or think about the actual sidewalks, the actual row

houses, the actual trees that we walk under every day.

But when we, when we do that, we lose the power through those things to connect to God and to connect to truth. Truth becomes an abstraction that is only out there but is never here.

It's never to be found on our block in this grandmother, in that auntie, on that porch. The lilies of our fields can't ever be considered and the workers that are standing in line around the corner to receive their pay, the kind of workers that Jesus was, you know, talking about in his stories.

We don't ever see those people because truth is always out there. God is always at work over there. We stay people who are grounded in generalized truths but never in the kind of rich truth that comes out of rootedness in place.

We remain unaware of the natural world close at hand and that can lead us to a worship of God and we remain unaware of our built environment that has the potential to create presence and connection.

[12:25] So yeah, it's really hard to talk about place but we have to talk about it and we have to become more grounded in it as followers of Jesus. Our full flourishing as human beings is connected to it.

The first human, Adam, it's not really a proper noun, Adam. Adam derives from the name Adama which is earth.

This is earthling. We are earthlings, people tied to place and to the community of creation and our ability to display God is tied to our sense of place.

Okay, so I've set this up. I've said a lot of things as we've gone through this series these things have been running through my head so I finally got them out there so there you go. So I want to talk about the city.

So what I'm going to do today is just move through several scriptures that can give us I think some helpful foundations and I'll name that this week I'm going to just lay the foundations and next week I'm going to talk some about more of the specifics about Washington D.C.

[13:41] itself. All right, so we're going to move pretty quickly. This is really compressed and then we should have a little bit of time toward the end for a little bit of small group time because I'm curious like how you all relate to place and what you would say to one another about that.

Okay, so the first place that the city shows up and cultural development shows up is in Genesis 4. It's connected to one of the Bible's most fundamental stories, the story of Cain and Abel.

It's this story that's about these two brothers. One of them, the oldest one, is actually cultivating the land. The other one, the youngest, as the youngest would do, is shepherding.

They both bring an offering to God and for reasons that are not too clear, I could offer some ideas, but not too clear. God does not accept the offering of the oldest son, Cain.

Cain gets angry, and here's how the rest of that story goes. Now, Cain said to his brother Abel, let's go out to the field.

[14:51] While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, where is your brother Abel? I don't know, he replied. Am I my brother's keeper?

The Lord said, what have you done? Listen, your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.

When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth. Cain said to the Lord, my punishment is more than I can bear.

Today you are driving me from the land and I will be hidden from your presence. I will be a restless wanderer on the earth and whoever finds me will kill me. But the Lord said to him, not so.

Anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over. Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. So Cain went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

[15:57] Cain made love to his wife and she became pregnant and gave birth to his son, Enoch. Cain was then building a city and he named it after his son Enoch.

So a couple of things about this story. So first of all, in it you get the first time in scripture that place is charged with moral meaning. The ground cries out.

There's a sense that the ground has been polluted, has been desecrated. Place carries memories and those memories they either haunt us or they heal us.

And then the story, this story also, because of what Cain does, he's disconnected from the land, which is to be disconnected from God. God protects him, but then he builds a city, which is this kind of odd detail that's thrown in.

So we have to ask at that point, like, why? God was supposed to be protecting Cain, so was it about self-protection that Cain builds a city? Did Cain distrust God's protection?

[17:06] Was there a longing for, like, escape or to maybe be anonymous among a larger group of people for safety? Whatever the reason, the first time you really see the city in scripture is connected to, like, murder and broken relationship with God and escapism and self-protection.

And still, a few verses later, you can put this up, I'm not going to read it, one of Cain's descendants is connected with cultural development that's really beautiful and we would think is happening within the city.

So, like, metalwork and arts and things like that, these human creations of beauty are also happening in the city. The next time we hear about the city is regarding this warrior, Nimrod.

You can also just put that up, I won't read it. It's a short section. But Nimrod is this builder of cities in Genesis. He's a warrior, builds Nineveh and Rehoboth in these cities.

And that seems all good enough except you learn that Nimrod, that name is connected to the word rebel. It is connected to, it means we shall rebel.

[18:16] So, again, you get the sense that the city is not particularly favorable. and then you get Genesis 11, the story of the Tower of Babel.

I am going to read that just to note a couple of things about it. Now, the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a place in Shinar and settled there.

They said to each other, come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly. They used brick instead of stone and tar for mortar. Then they said, come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we may make a name for ourselves.

Otherwise, we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth. But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The Lord said, if as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible.

Come, let us go down and confuse their language so that they will not understand each other. So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth and they stopped building the city. That is why it is called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world.

[19:34] From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth. There's so much that can be said about this story. It's usually associated with the sin of pride, this idea of these people getting together and saying, let us, let us do this thing that maybe doesn't seem too connected to God and God's good governance of the world.

And the story is definitely about this kind of problematic self-assertion that happens in cities. This sense that the city is this place where you can kind of make yourself and remake yourself over and over again apart from God.

But it's also a story about, I don't know if you noticed this, but the word one is repeated a bunch of times. It's about exclusivism. It's about a city turned in on itself that is not for the good of the rest of the world.

It's about a hoarding of ideas and knowledge. And yeah, we can imagine that the skill they use in building the city might be good. And yet again, you see something problematic about the city.

Last thing I want to, or last scripture for now I want to say, I want to use and talk about the city is an exodus. And it's a scripture that's just connected to the beginning of the exodus story.

[20:54] A story in which basically Pharaoh, because of his own fearfulness of this group of people, enslaves them and accumulates massive wealth for the few based on these people's labor.

It's about concentration based in scarcity and outrageous accumulation. And again, we can look around and see how cities make this possible.

Okay. So that's a pretty compressed view. What I want to do right now is ask you to actually get into groups of just maybe two or three people.

We're just going to take about five minutes and then I'll bring us to a close after that. But about three or three, maybe two or three people, introduce yourself, give your name, what neighborhood you're from inside or outside of D.C.

And then here, you can't discuss all these questions in five minutes. So choose one that you're like, this is what I want to discuss. So think about are you from a rural area or a suburb or a city and how does that bias you to thinking about the city?

[22 : 01] What are some of the problems that you see specifically arising from the city and what is some of its promise? And how does that show up in D.C.? So just take about five minutes, shake it out, do a little Madonna if you've got that in you, you know, something, since I couldn't.

And then we'll come back together. I think the questions are up there, so go for it. So I know that was far too short, so I hope that I'm going to be done in a few minutes. I hope that at the end you all get back together and continue the conversations.

So as you were talking, I hope that you were able to process a little bit of what you think about the potential and promise of the city, the problems of the city and of this city, about this place itself.

And I hope that you were actually able to start to think about your own vision of the good life. What is that vision? So when I came here, I came to D.C. in 2004.

I came from North Carolina, a town at the time of about 230,000 people. My mother and father, both, my mother's from a small town in North Carolina.

[23 : 11] My father was from a true farm and came from generations of farmers. And I was taught that land was the most important thing. You had to own it. It was a joy to cultivate it.

That's what I was taught. So when I came here, y'all, and I went down into the metro and like DuPont and I saw a rat, I was like, I don't know why it's happening right now.

I was like, I had no, I did not connect that to a sense of promise or beauty. I honestly, I was in the metro. I was like, why would people choose this?

You could just drive. And I thought to myself, like, you know, I would see the row houses and what people called a yard. And I was like, what? Like, what is this?

But what I've like come to think about and realize, and here's where I want to end, is that I had a vision of the good life that was about having this really, you know, a nice size house on a nice size lot.

[24 : 10] And I had never interrogated that kind of isolationist view as a Christian. But now, as I think about these scriptures and some of these that, you know, are pretty unfavorable to the city, I also have to say that I'm really struck by how the trajectory of cities, the view of cities in scripture changes.

So like, by the time you get to Leviticus, like, what is unclean is outside the city. Right? Like, you get the creation of cities of refuge that can be safe harbors to people.

And some of us have needed that kind of safe harbor in cities. And then, most importantly, for the people of Israel, it is a city in which they put both their earthly hope and their heavenly hope, Jerusalem.

And then, all of scripture ends with this, with Revelation 21. Revelation. I just did that, y'all.

Revelation 21. You get a city descending from heaven that has streets and walls and might even have real houses, y'all.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city of the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adored for her husband.

[25 : 36] In the end, the city seems to be a place that is favored by God. All right, I am going to stop there and leave with a little bit of a cliffhanger because next week I'm going to talk a lot more about this, the details of what it might mean to live in a city and I came from one of those evangelical churches where I was like, claim the city.

I don't mean like that. That's not what we're doing. That is not what we're doing next week, okay?

But we're going to talk more about this and then get into some of the application of it. I would say in this week there are a couple of things I would encourage you to do.

Two things really. One is really sit down, spend some time, however you, you know, meditate, pray, contemplate, and really think through your vision of the good life because these scriptures seem to say that in some way we're all called to be city people and I don't mean you have to live in a city but there's something about the city and the potential in a city that disciples have to be thinking about, followers of Jesus have to be thinking about.

So consider that. What's your view of the city? Yeah, what is your view of the good life? And then the second thing is consider, we're starting, you're going to hear about this this week in our

newsletter, we'll talk about it more next week, but we're starting a learning cohort and the first book we're going to read together as a church for anybody, it's voluntary, I was volunteering, is Chocolate City which is, I think the subtitle is like a history of race and democracy in the nation's capital. So consider like, maybe do you have enough time to read that because we're really going to talk some about like, like learn like what is DC? What's our history? How do we find healing and hope or how are we haunted by it now?

[27 : 22] So those are my two calls to you. May we discover anew that surely as we do these things, the Lord is in this place and is in this city and that this is none other than the house of God.

Amen.