

“Enter At Your Own Risk”

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I Kings 8:22-23, 27, 30, 41-43 = God’s worship

On visiting Beijing in 2005 with my family, I was struck with how the entrance to almost every attraction had a courtyard filled with statues of strange creatures: the Summer Palace, the Forbidden City, indeed every imperial residence, all had these mythological creatures prominently displayed.



Mr. Li, our host, explained that all this statuary was to impress upon visitors how they were leaving behind the earthly, everyday realm and were entering a different world, a sphere not of this earth, the heavenly realm of the gods. All this was designed to engender awe, to strike fear in the hearts of any who

would approach the seat of the god-emperor ~ far better than imperial guards in scaring off unwanted visitors.

That is exactly what Solomon intended in building a temple in Jerusalem to Yahweh, the God of Israel. The Temple was the place where the Ark of the Covenant was stored in the innermost part, the holy of holies.



We have seen how the ark brought fear with it; how to touch it brought death. David sacrificed animals every six paces to ward off its curse. The ark was a fearsome thing, the throne of the Living God, with statues of fearsome, mythological beasts guarding it on each side.



Solomon built the Temple to provide a safe haven ~ a way to approach God while maintaining a safe distance.

The temple precincts were intended, designed specifically to make sure everyone knew they were entering the realm of the Living God. A place they could be struck dead in a moment. They should enter it only with the

proper awe and respect, fear and trembling, not casually nor for any trivial reason.

A direct pipeline to God, a precinct of heaven itself, a little slice of God's realm ~ a scary place only to be entered out of necessity. We must always enter God's presence ready to be changed.

Many years ago, 1,800 United Methodists were gathered for an Ordination service at a June meeting of the South Indiana Conference. Then a telephoned bomb threat came through. The auditorium at Indiana University quickly emptied.



The evacuation was hasty and not too orderly. On exiting the crowd found it was raining. There was little complaining because everyone realized how much the rain was needed during a drought. Forty-five minutes later the gathering heard the announcement that the building had been searched and nothing was found. They could reenter the building.



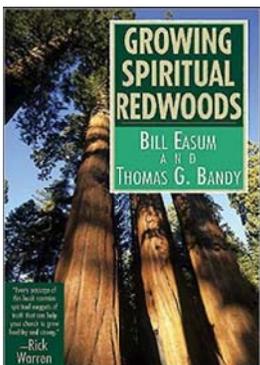
As the wet Methodists started to enter through the door, security people kept repeating, "Please enter at your own risk." Strange counsel wouldn't you say for people entering a religious service. Or is it?

When we enter our narthex, what if we saw such a sign: "Enter at your own risk. After the service your life may never be the same again!" Wouldn't that be something ~ to actually be transformed by what happens in our sanctuary?



Easum and Bandy in their book *Growing Spiritual Redwoods* insist quite emphatically that in a healthy congregation real worship is the coming together to celebrate real life transformations under the power of the Spirit and the realm of God. Nothing less will do.

"Enter at your own risk" should be posted as a warning outside every act of worship. Indeed, in Solomon's temple you approached one of the earth's most dangerous places, the throne of the Living God. Reverence, yes but a large dose of fear-filled awe as well.

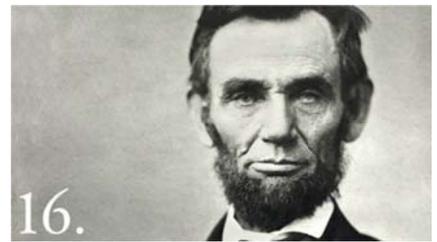


Every time we enter God's presence in God's sanctuary we risk something ~ or we should. Compare other instances in Scripture: Moses at the burning bush, Elijah passing the mantle to Elisha, Isaiah struck dumb in the Temple, the Transfiguration. Opening ourselves to God, we should be opening ourselves to God's challenging us, to God's changing us, to transformation, open ourselves to surprise, and faith, and hope, and love.

"Enter at your own risk. After the service your life may never be the same again!"

This is the bottom line for all authentic worship and ministry: "Where are our changed lives?" "What transformations can we claim here at GPC?"

Abraham Lincoln was not the lifelong person of pious faith as often thought. Early in life he had rejected the judgmental faith of his parents. His trust in God and God's plan came later in his life. The turning point came as it happens in a worship service at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in DC.



In February 1862 in the middle of his presidency, his son Willie died of typhoid fever. The eulogy at the funeral by the Rev. Phineas Gurley spoke to Lincoln. He asked for a copy. Gurley had said, "What we need in the hour of trial, and what we should seek by earnest prayer, is confidence in [God] who sees the end from the beginning and doeth all things well."²

A biographer observes: "This sermon is a real pivotal moment in Lincoln's life. Your son has died; you listen to this sermon; this pastor whom you have respected comes into the White House and suggests to you that you need to trust [personally] in a loving God ... who acts in history."³ From this experience of God in the sanctuary, Lincoln seeks a renewed relationship.

Suddenly a number of the overwhelming crises with which Lincoln was struggling came into crystal clear perspective ~ all evolving from that moment in worship, touched by God's hand in the sanctuary, the temple of God.



Lincoln began to search for signs of God's will on the question of emancipation. He had resisted freeing the slaves, convinced that he did not have the authority to do so.⁴ Yet now the way had come into sharp focus. Perhaps apocryphal, but it is reported that Lincoln penned his first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation while worshipping in the sanctuary of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church.

“Enter at your own risk. After the service your life may never be the same again!”

Again I ask: “Where are the changed lives?” “What transformations can we claim here at GPC?”

Mere claiming to be inclusive is not enough. Pat Keifert, in his video series *The Inviting and Engaging Church* uses our passage from 1 Kings 8 to talk about whether our worship is transforming of just ourselves or transforming of all who enter. The Temple which Solomon built was to be a beacon to all the nations. From our text today:



“Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name ... they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm ... so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and [revere] you.”



Merely claiming inclusion is not enough, worship must be inclusive: even foreigners, and aliens and people not like us, and people we dislike, and people with whom we disagree, all coming here together, at great personal risk, to be transformed.

“Enter at your own risk.”

Enter this sanctuary at your own risk where we do hope to be transformed, where we endeavor to reverence God, to become more, to undertake the first baby steps to know ourselves and know our purpose, to be comforted and challenged, consoled and commissioned.



Enter at your own risk: you may be changed. You will be surprised. You can become more than you ever thought possible, if you allow God's Spirit to lead.

Enter at your own risk. Enter a lifetime of being surprised by God. Enter a lifetime of being transformed by God. Enter a lifetime of being led by God to places we cannot even imagine.

¹ David E. Leininger, *Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit: Cycle A* p. 173

² from the PBS *God in America* series: <http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/people/abraham-lincoln.html>

³ Ronald White in <http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/interviews/ronald-white.html>

⁴ from the PBS *God in America* series: <http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/people/abraham-lincoln.html>