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11/7/21—University Presbyterian Church  
Genesis 28:10-19a; Matthew 16:13-18; **1 Peter 2:4-10**

## SACRED PLACES, SACRED SPACES

Rocks are pretty durable substances. Certainly rocks can be chipped and rocks can be worn down. But overall, rocks are very durable substances that last a really long time. And that is why rocks are mentioned in all three of our scriptures today as representations of something lasting. In our first reading, Jacob sets up a stone as a cairn to be an enduring marker of the place where he had a sacred encounter with God. He declared of that place: “This is none other than the house of God.” And when you think about it, isn’t that exactly what our church buildings are? Our church buildings stand as giant stone cairns marking the sacred places where we encounter God; the holy spaces we consider to be the house of God.

In our reading from Matthew, Jesus tells Simon, “You are Peter,” a play on words because in Greek the name Peter means “rock.” Jesus adds, “and on this rock I will build my church.” Jesus wasn’t talking about building a structure like our church buildings when he said this. Rather, Jesus was speaking about the creation of a community of believers who would live out the good news of God’s love.

Then in the reading from 1 Peter, the writer implores the community of believers, you and I, to become what the writer calls “living stones,” and to allow ourselves to be “built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood.” We are to be those enduring markers, those holy cairns of God’s presence in the world.

Something is holy or sacred when it contains the presence of God, when it contains an element of the divine. That is what makes something sacred. Over the course of UPC’s 100 years, this building made of rock and fired earth has been a sacred place and a sacred space in

many, many ways. Weekly worship, marriages and funerals, baptisms, prayers offered for one another and our world, meals prepared and meals shared, Bible studies, and people turning to God as they wrestled with hard questions and decisions—all of these activities and more were sacred occasions when God's presence was acknowledged and called upon.

Sacred places and spaces occurred in moments we may even have overlooked: at boring meetings when the mundane but necessary work of the church is done, or when setting tables, washing dishes, preparing for a Sunday school classes, tending the building.

And we will also want to consider the ways the people of University Presbyterian Church made sacred space within our hearts and minds and souls for the presence of God: when we were moved to forgive another person, to prepare a meal for someone in need, to write a note, to make a call, to offer a ride, to join a march, to make a visit, to take a deep breath in search of patience when someone irritated us, to see something beautiful or experience a moment of grace and to give thanks, or simply those moments we were compelled to be still and know that God is there. Sacred places and sacred spaces.

Many of you know that about a month ago, someone broke into our building and vandalized our sanctuary and choir room. Items were smashed, hymnals and Bibles and the Memorial book were ripped and thrown about, photos were shattered, filing cabinets were overturned. It was a mess. And most especially it was a shock to see our beautiful sanctuary, our sacred space desecrated.

Members of our congregation were swift to respond to clean up, to manage our disaster, and deal with the police and insurance company. When the word about the vandalism spread, we received countless emails and phone calls of support from other churches who were distressed about our misfortune. Their congregations held us in prayer. One member of the Hamburg

Presbyterian Church showed up on our clean-up day to help out. Another church in the Presbytery took up a collection and sent us \$100. Others shared our sense of horror at the violation of our sacred place.

But the Christian community is not always as swift with action or outrage when we witness violations to God's holy way: when refugees are turned away from finding safe haven, when children live in poverty and neglect on the other side of town, when our institutions perpetuate oppression and racism generation after generation, or when our current habits and lifestyles threaten the welfare of our entire planet.

As scripture reminds us, the sacred places and the sacred spaces that are most important to God are not found in buildings but in those actions of love, grace, justice, compassion, and service. Jesus never set out to build a building but rather he sought to construct something lasting in the human heart. "Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood." We are God's living stones, the resources God uses to build an enduring realm of love, forgiveness, compassion, justice, and peace. You and I are the rocks upon which Jesus builds his church, as were all those here at UPC who came before us. It is not the enduring presence of our building that we celebrate today, but rather the enduring power of God's love lived out in us fallible, flawed, and yet dedicated people. And you and I and our lives are the living stones, the rocky cairns, that point the way for others to find a sacred place and a sacred space.