Tapestry: a metaphor

The biblical narrative is a story that moves from creation to consummation, which is symbolized by two places: the Garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem. These two places are not only gifts but represent places where life flourishes and the divine donor is present. In neither is there a need for a demarcated sacred space; in neither is there a temple. But in between these two sites there is a pilgrimage, what Augustine called procursus, a journey through an ensemble of places that frame the narrative: fields, houses, deserts, and so forth. In the ambiguous experience of these places, divine presence (parousia) and absence (apousia) cross each other. And, of course, in the midst of it all is a place called Golgotha, the site where God surrendered Godself to the very gift that was given, for God so loved spaces and places as to fill them with divine presence (John 3:16); the Giver gave herself in the gift as the Gift itself; God became spacious in surrendering Godself up to the emptiness of a space.

Is not the narrative of the faith, then, the creation and fulfillment of space and, in the midst of it, the experience of being exiled from it? Between spaces of belonging (=being by a longing or desire) and exile (=being uprooted), between houses and streets, we live our lives and shape our places, or else are by them displaced. Our vocation is not only lived out in locations and places, it is about shaping and recreating them, investing in them an intention.

In search of a metaphor to anchor my thinking and the way to convey it, I remember this poem by Christian Morgenstern:

One time there was a picket fence
with spaces to gaze from hence to thence.

An architect who saw this sight
approached it suddenly one night,
removed the spaces from the fence
and built of them a residence.¹

I liked the idea, the rococo style, and especially the image of taking the empty spaces in a picket fence to build a hosting place. But the notion of a picket fence does not go together with the notion of the gift.

Licensed by some poetic freedom, I want to slightly change the root metaphor, and instead of a picket fence I suggest another metaphor: a tapestry—and the rest

might remain the same, for I am thinking also about an interlocking set of laces that are spaces out of which we build places. Thus, instead of a fence, I shall write about a tapestry that sustains our existence by its interwoven threads of woofs and warps. The longitudinal threads, the woofs, are the “Edens” of our existence. The transversal warps that the weaver keeps on threading are the “New Jerusalems” that cross the paths of our existence and hold it together as the weaving continues. In the loops, hanging in faith to the entwined threads, we live our lives, creating and recreating those spaces, sustaining ourselves by holding on to those threads, and not rarely losing our grip. We do not inhabit the threads; we are by their interwoven patterns sustained in the loops. Allow me to proceed with my own weaving, warning the reader that the patterns may not be very distinct at the beginning but, hopefully, if I am a passable weaver, they will emerge as I weave on.

Metabolism: space as gift and task

We create spaces and also destroy them, as much as spaces shape, build, and threaten our existence. Above all, space is something given. What we do with space is what we do with a gift, and, as any gift, it comes with an intention. Whatever construction we put into the doctrine of the creation out of nothing, the bottom line is that the spaces we live our lives in, our vital spaces, are ultimately this gift, and not a neutral ground that is simply there apart from God’s creative and redemptive purposes. Whatever one does with and in space is done upon a divine gift. The body, whose resurrection Christians confess, is the minimum space we are all endowed with, and so it is also with the New Jerusalem, the city we constantly fail to build but which still is the warp that sustains the tapestry. But once we assert this, the question is what this gift of the tapestry of our existence does to us, and what we do to and with it.²

Space is a category so vast that it demands an initial categorical delimitation. I will attempt to stay as close as possible to the way that we as embodied beings experience embodiment. As much as our biological organism is constantly reproducing itself through a process called metabolism, an analogous process takes place with our surroundings—a room, a park, a street, a chapel, a library, a cell—with which there is a constant give-and-take (i.e., metabolism) that shapes us as much as we constantly shape it. Our bodies and their surroundings are embedded in this metabolism through which they create an identity and leave a mark that generates a morphology, or a differential space, a space that distinguishes itself from other spaces. When we say that something “takes place,” it means that in a given space a differential sign is left, but this is always a struggle. The struggle to create a unique identity or a signature is often what Henri Lefebvre has called “trial by space,” which happens in the confrontation between our

2. The theological relevance of space is not an issue to be approached without recognizing its perils. Paul Tillich warns that space is pagan; only time, with which space is at battle, is spiritual and Christian (Tillich, Der Widerstreit von Raum und Zeit [Stuttgart: Ev. Verlags-werk, 1963], 140–48). I have argued elsewhere that this very divorce of time from space is a peculiar Western and modern feature (“Re(li)gion: The Lord of History and the Illusory Space,” in Region and Religion, ed. Viggo Mortensen [Geneva: LWF, 1994]). Here I leave this discussion about the relation of time and space aside and restrict my remarks to our experience of physical space as locales and places that are extensions that embody us and that we embody, that we build and by which we are built.
finite freedom and destiny. We want to create a marked space that defines our identity, our body, our social position, our home, employment, vacation site, that which is proper to who we are or who we would like to be.

**The spectrum of spatial experiences: banquets and deserts**

This struggle in spatial encounters, this trial by space—be it travel to outer space, crossing the university campus here in Hyde Park, Chicago, to 63rd street, the touch of another person, or even the intake of some food into our body—is always an experience of otherness, an encounter with alterity. Michel Foucault called it heterotopia, suggesting that the other place is always the place of an other. Taking a clue from a text of Paul Tillich, this meeting an other, be it a person or a place, can be of two kinds. The encounter may be complementary, as a discovery of ourselves, or it can be of a confrontational nature, where we meet the other as a stranger, exposing us to what we are not, which can come as a promise or as the threat of annihilation. These two forms of encounter are opposite poles in a vast spectrum of experiences we go through in our everyday lives.

In the first case, the experience of otherness is one of belonging, of being recognized. The biblical parables of banquets are illustrations of such encounters. The prodigal son is given back an identity he had lost in displacement. Displaced people are invited in. The host recognizes the guest and asks him to move closer. But such encounters with expectations of recognition can turn also into displacement. A guest is put in “his place” because he pretended to be more than he was, or, worse, is sent away for not being properly attired for the occasion. If you pretend to be what you are not in the social fabric of a “banquet,” you are put in your place, you do not take place, you experience what Kafka called a “non-person.”

In the second case, the encounter of the other as a stranger, the desert—the place from which one does not take much or leave a significant trace behind—often represents the experience of sheer otherness. The reason why desert experiences are often associated with trial, indeed, trial by space, is that little metabolism takes place. In desert experiences we often are confronted with epiphanies or mirages, for in the absence of metabolism we become susceptible to sheer otherness, to that which we cannot process or metabolize, be it the devil or the unutterable presence of the divine. When we move into a heterotopia, it is not only strange because we do not recognize it; a strange place does not carry our imprint. The estrangement is double. The other place or the place of the other also does not recognize us. When Job describes the experience of being in Sheol, it is for him a radical condition of being displaced. So we read: “He who goes down to Sheol... returns no more to his house, nor does his place know him any more” (Job 7:9–10; also Ps 103:16). This is the reason Job attributes subjectivity to places—because they embody intentions that invite or

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6. Starvation and the discipline of fasting create similar conditions. They are forms of estrangement, one imposed and the other chosen. This phenomenon accounts also for the effectiveness of hunger strikes; the participants in the strike become the uncomfortable strangers in the social fabric in which they are inserted.
exclude us. (A desert knows one as little as a building inaccessible to a physically challenged person knows that person.)

Spaces are not a neutral reality we can dispose of or simply use. Such an approach is an abstraction that takes away from spaces the fact that they embody intentions and ideas; they do something to us as we interact with them. We *take* place; we make it our own, we give it a shape, generating morphology and leaving a mark.7

Between these two experiences, deserts and banquets, we negotiate our “taking place” in and through the laces of the tapestry I am describing. Literally speaking, deserts and banquets are not often part of our everyday life, but they typify experiences akin to them. Like deserts, there are some spaces whose primary intent is to move us beyond them; they are shaped to keep us moving into other spaces. Others, akin to banquets, are designed to entail the purpose of our existence within them; we are grafted into their texture. I call the first *locales*, and the second *places*.

**Types of space: locales and places**

A locale is a position one is in that indicates and locates us within a trajectory. Locales interplay between centrifugal and centripetal forces. They send us somewhere else, as much as they are designed to attract us. They are functions not of rest but of motion and transit; they are points in the transition from place to place. If a store is in a location, a locale, it means that it is in a given place of transit where it can attract business or customers, but after you buy your merchandise you should move on. One is always in a locale for the sake of something else. Airports, bus stations, malls, streets, airplanes, buses, and trains are spaces in which one finds oneself in the expectation of meeting otherness. No matter how comfortable the facilities in a locale, there is no limit to the annoyance that a delayed or cancelled flight can cause. A locale is a given station one finds oneself at in a given moment of transition from place to place. The representation of locales are often itineraries, like a subway chart that tells you the point you are at and the destination you are going to but reveals little if anything at all of the surrounding territory; they do not place you, they locate you.

The architecture of locales is designed to be open and public with very little private room available. Its decoration consists of posters, murals, advertisements, simulacra (normally reproductions of famous pieces of art or movie scenes)—all that can catch the eye in a glance but does not hold the gaze, for one is moving and must be invited to move. One does not inhabit a locale; one just happens to be there. It simultaneously invites us in and sends us off. Locales are impervious to our shaping of them. One does not rearrange the furniture in an airport. One does not sit in a first-class coach if the train ticket is for a second-class seat. The case of Rosa Parks, who in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to give her seat to a white man in a segregated bus shows how costly but creatively disturbing it is to shape a locale in a way other than the original intent with which it was designed.

Places are different from this. Their invested intent is not of being provisional spaces of transition; their function is to be catalysts. They gather for the sake of providing refuge, shelter, or intimacy. Houses

7. Even pristine nature is charged with these intentions by, if nothing else, the very fact of being represented—by observation, photograph, or painting. The intention they carry comes from the gaze of the observer/photographer/painter who intentionally chooses, frames, and demarcates what is conveyed.
or homes are the names we often give to inclusive places. Their intent is to release one from the transitory experiences of everyday life, from locales we move through. Within limits and according to financial resources, these places, different from locales, are moldable to one’s intention. One makes a house or an apartment one’s own by designing, decorating, redesigning, or furnishing it. Home, the saying goes, is the place where one’s heart is. (Jacques Derrida nicely rephrases it, “The correct location of the heart is the place that is best placed.”) You know the intent of a place when you hear the welcoming salutation: *Mi casa es tu casa.* If locales are represented by itineraries or maps, blueprints or photographs represent places.

Our everyday life is a negotiation between these two experiences in an alternating and pendular movement. One is marked by the spaces of transit, which are not ends in themselves. The other is the space of rest and shelter, even seclusion. But what counts here is the dynamic relation between locales and places, how we transit through the tapestry. Not being able to move among these different spaces is what defines displacement. Displacement is thus not a vacuum but rather being immobilized in a given space. Not being able to leave a place, not being able to transit, is to be shut in, in a prison, a hospice, or even a home (as the experience of many women around the world to this day attest). Displacement is also to have a locale as the only place one has. Homeless persons and landless peasants live and make places out of locales meant for transit. These are the mirror images of those who are shut in; they share the same displacement or exclusion by being secluded to a space of transit. The expression “doing time” conveys this sense of immobility, of being stuck between locales and places. There is life and hope as long as there is movement and as long as this tapestry keeps on being woven.

**Hybrid spaces: thin and thick**

Between locales and places there is a third type of physical space, hybrid space. Offices, classrooms, assembly lines, hospitals, commuter apartments, sweatshops, cafes, halfway houses, parks, town squares, and theaters are typical hybrid spaces, which are places both of transition and of dwelling but not exactly either of them. Hybrid spaces are not simply transitions between one space and another, like locales. They also are not spaces that center our sense of belonging, like places. They are spaces between places and locales. Having access to hybrid spaces is what grants us the possibility to move around between locales and places yet inhabit neither. In defining the spatial condition of those who are territorially, culturally, or politically neither insiders nor outsiders, yet both, postcolonial studies call it hybridity.

Flanked by locales and places, being both and neither, hybrid space best describes a way of taking place that allows me here a further step in this reflection. Take two different examples of hybrid spaces, a sweatshop and a cafe. The opposing experiences that they convey are real, but they share the common features of being spaces neither of transition nor of shelter or dwelling, and yet they have features of both and are, for better or worse, places that indicate neither that one is displaced nor that one necessarily belongs.  

One can further distinguish among hy-


9. Sociologists also describe displacement as exclusion, a condition to which increasing armies of desolate people are being added daily in this global economy.
brid spaces. There are those that can be called thick hybrid spaces, thick in the sense that they leave in us an imprint of their inherent purpose. That is, they shape our perception of space more significantly than we endow them with our spatial construction because of the memorable impressions of their grandeur, or impressions of memories that they symbolize, or the way they altered our circumstances (by the positioning in turn of a person or a person’s situation). However, they also are catalysts of our intentions. They are thick because they hold our attention and entail an enduring intention. Thin hybrid spaces do neither; they are either so moldable to our purposes as to be innocuous (like a cubicle office that one can decorate to the extreme only to empty it all in a box the day one leaves the job) or so impermeable that they soon become equally insignificant (like assembly lines in a car factory).

Monumental and archival spaces

One can distinguish three types of typical or exemplary thick hybrid spaces that bring locales and places to a new level of significance: those that are monumental, archival, and epiphanic. I will comment briefly on the uniqueness of the first two and keep the rest of my remarks for the third, which is often confused with the other two but is quite distinct.

Monumental spaces are a thick result of the hybridity of locales and places that function like a relief in a flat surface. They are appealing because of their majestic and imposing features. They do not need to tell a story; they are the story in themselves. They stand as symbolic representations for their surroundings. They do not need to be defined, for they are themselves the definition; they have a synthetic quality. The Empire State building, Christ the Redeemer at Corcovado in Rio, the John Hancock building, Mount Kilimanjaro, Central Park in New York, Saint Peter’s Square in Rome, the Alhambra in Granada, Big Ben in London, and the Great Wall of China are magnificent examples of such monumental spaces. Their symbolic meaning comes from the fact that in their design they are conduits of meanings broader than themselves. They arrest the gaze. They fascinate us as gifts to be preserved in the traces that they leave in our memories and photo albums. Monumental spaces are memorable.

Archival spaces are similar, but their main characteristic is not the appearance, the shapes, the colors, the imprint they leave in our minds, or the sensuous attention they summon. Archival spaces are not the synthesized story of a place, as monumental spaces are; instead, they contain stories. They register memorable events. Monumental spaces are memorable; archival spaces are repositories of memories. Monumental spaces connect a locale to a place; archival spaces are locales that connect us to a history and to stories of other places. Their fascination is not in themselves but in the memories that they evoke. Examples are the Water Tower in Chicago, Ground Zero in New York, the church door in Wittenberg, cemeteries, museums, and historic sites and buildings. There is not much to be seen in the spaces themselves, but one cannot miss the stories they tell.

Although spaces can be both monumental and archival, the basic intention in each is distinct; either the monumental or the archival prevails. Which prevails often depends on who invests it with a certain gaze, which determines the prevalent meaning. A familiar example is Mount Rushmore. For some who make the pilgrimage it is predominantly a monumental space when its ponderous features prevail; for
others it is an archival space holding the memory of what has made the United States the nation it is.

**Epiphanic spaces: a note of caution**

The third form of thick hybrid space can be called epiphanic, for want of a better word. I am trying at this point to avoid the use of the notion of “sacred spaces” or even “holy places,” because these suggest a distinction from any other space as being profane. The problem with such definitions is that they tend to be essentialist, as if something of an ontological quality is embedded in their being. Such essentialism turns profane spaces into sites that are released from any constraint as to their exchangeability and exploitation. The necessary other side of sacred essentialism is the unrestricted exploitation of the profane. In other words, the unrestricted exploitation of space is the counterpart to the institution of “sacred” spaces and sanctuaries. The reverse is also true: the institution of “sacred” spaces and sanctuaries, when essentialized, is a function of the exploitation of other spaces. The preservation or institution of designated places as “sacred” can be also the moral and religious sanction for the clearance of all other spaces.¹⁰

The move from epiphanic spaces to the institution of “sacred” places as spaces endowed with a different ontic quality is what may properly be called idolatry. The idol arrests the gaze; its nature is opaque. One is fixated by it in a representation taking it for what it presumably stands for. In the Solid Declaration X of the Formula of Concord, the Lutheran reformers maintained that idolatry is defined by turning something that is or might be good into something that is essential, making something of the essence when it is an adiaphoron. This is why it is important to recognize monumental and archival spaces for their specific qualities and, undoubtedly, greatness, for they often are taken to be holy, for the wrong reason—for their monumental or archival features. Because of the endurance that monumental and archival spaces have, it is tempting to attribute the long-lasting quality of their magnificence to an ontological difference that would set them qualitatively apart from the rest of creation.

Epiphany marks a differential space, but not for any presumed ontological quality. That which is proper to it is an event, the event in which the divine is made manifest in a given space. Epiphany can be a burning bush in the desert or a stable in which a displaced mother gives birth to a child (which the liturgical year properly celebrates as Epiphany). As monumental and archival spaces, epiphanic spaces are also thick spaces in the sense that they leave a lasting imprint in the mind and in emotions. They call for attention and embody enduring intentions. But, unlike other thick spaces, epiphanic spaces have certain traits. First, like monumental spaces, they are memorable—not, however, for their imposing shapes and designs (which they could also have, yet without seizing the gaze) but for their quality of transparency, of sending the gaze beyond the space itself, something that monumental spaces do not do. Second, epiphanic spaces, like archival spaces, store memories. However, they are repositories of memories in and through which a future is unveiled, a promise is entailed. Their intent as spaces endowed with subjectivity is, to use a theological term, eschatological, while archival spaces are genealogical. The memory in them is

the memory of a future, anticipated (as a prolepsis) in stories of the past.

Additionally, epiphanic spaces are places of parousia, places where the divine presence is embodied in the very stuff of the world: in a building, in music, in the word, in paintings, in a meal, in statues, in the Book, in the embrace of a friend or a stranger—all wrappings of the divine. This presence has three forms of manifestations, as most of the Christian tradition and specifically its Lutheran version recognize. The first manifestation is the man, Jesus of Nazareth, whose history and stories are housed by epiphanic spaces. The second is the communion of those who follow and confess him throughout history, i.e., the church, its rites and message that epiphanic spaces celebrate. The third mode of presence comes in a disguised or anonymous way anywhere in the whole of creation, which makes any space potentially epiphanic.\footnote{See \textit{The Book of Concord}, trans. and ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 587 (Solid Declaration, art. VII). The Western Enlightenment tradition, with its aversion to apophatic and mystical aspects of the faith, often obliterated this third mode of presence, and this is a further reason for essentializing sacred spaces.}

\section*{The church as epiphanic space}

In the ecclesial context of discussing location and vocation, I reserve my last and main comments to the thick hybrid space called church, the second form of the manifestation of presence. As memorable sites entailing stories and promising a future, their hybridity is also in the fact that they mark stations of transition and also places of rest, shelter, and healing, but they are not exactly either of them.

How can this hybridity be expressed in the particular case of churches? Luke, in the first book of church history available to us, the Book of Acts, gives us a clue. He often describes the church by these two images, which are apparently contradictory: the church of those of the Way (hodos, path, road) and also of those who gather from house to house. Which is it, a locale or a place? In a sense it is both, in another sense neither—it is a hybrid space.

Certain formal features can be lifted up that have implications for the way we recognize, design, experience, and interact with them. First, there is a poetics of space construction, which resembles the creation of an icon. Second, there is a given doxological posture that demarcates and identifies a space as a contemplative and healing place. Third, there is a practice that distinguishes it and is inscribed in the very texture of its space, a practice of adjacency. To these I now turn.

\textit{An iconic poetry.} Holy spaces are poietic. The poetics of space designates what the Greek word poiesis conveys; it refers to the "creation," to the making or production of a space. Any space definable as an entity—a building, a reservation, a park, a church, a train, any of these and many others—once demarcated and given an identity, is, as we have seen, the result of a metabolic relationship between natural elements and human labor.\footnote{For the use of the biological metaphor of metabolism in connection with human labor, see my article "Labor: A Suggestion for Rethinking the way of the Christian," \textit{Word and World} 4/2 (1986): 194–206.} There is no creatio ex nihilo, except for God’s own creation, which we see only in faith and will see with our own eyes once the tapestry of God’s providence is completed. But in the midst of the unfolding of this weaving, all the rest is poiesis or labor in metabolic exchange. A holy space is always a space demarcated...
When art and architecture turn into an end of the subjective whim of designers, architects, artists, committees, or donors, the idol lurks behind.

over against other spaces by the fact that there is an intention in its construction and in the delineation of its boundaries; its intention is not defined by utility. Unlike office buildings, houses, gyms, streets, hotels, and cars, a holy space belongs to a different economy. Its end is not a return to an investment; it divests. But this does not mean that it is not a space that, while it divests and shares, also provides and nurtures. In its divestment and nurturing, the poietic labor is the one of presenting the Gift. The one who wraps the Gift should have the attitude, the posture of the poet who builds, designs, furnishes, and decorates this Gift with colors, shapes, and sounds. The wrapping communicates the endearment with which the Gift is given. However, the wrapping is not the reason for the Gift, neither does it summon it; the wrapping conveys, carries, and holds the Gift, it gives it a visible tactile shape for the senses to feel. The poietic vocation might leave a signature, but it will finally be underwritten soli deo gloria, as was done by that great poet of musical ornamentation, Johann Sebastian Bach, in signing the scores to his compositions.

In the twelfth century the Notre Dame cathedral in Chartres, France, was struck by lightning and burned to the ground. Legend has it that thousands of people from all over the compass came like a procession of ants; masons, burghers, artisans, carpenters, clowns, master builders, peasants, noblemen, nuns and monks, women and men, to rebuild the cathedral. And the now-famous pilgrimage site stands there, and no one to this day knows who built it. It was an anonymous act of divestment for the sake of creating a space for the glory of God. Beauty can be transparent!

Commenting on this legend, Ingmar Bergman called attention to the fact that today art has been separated from worship. [Art] severed an umbilical cord and now lives its own sterile life, generating and degenerating itself. . . . Today . . . we stand and bleat about our loneliness without listening to each other and without realizing that we are smothering each other to death . . . [we] stare into each other's eyes and yet deny the existence of each other.  

When such dissociation happens in connection with a consecrated place, like a church, chapel, temple, mosque, or a synagogue, when art and architecture turn into an end of the subjective whim of designers, architects, artists, committees, or donors, the idol lurks behind.

This is then the first characteristic of the church as an epiphanic space. It is the result of a creative, poietic labor that stands to its end, to its objective, as the wrapping stands for the gift; it gives to the gift a

13. For Luther space is described as a mask (larva), wrapping (involucrum), or the dress (vestitus) God wears. See Luther's Works 26:95–96.
provisional shape, a culturally determined shape that aims at enhancing the meaning of the content for the senses. The wrapping is the result of a labor which is neither for its own sake nor for the sake of the laborer but for the gift it wraps. The distinction between being an aim in itself obfuscating the invisible and being an attempt to be a visible cipher that refers the beholder not to itself but to that which cannot be seen is the difference between the idol and the icon.\textsuperscript{15}

A room for doxology. A second sign of a holy space is that it be a place of healing and safety, where people can trust that God is with them, sustaining, nurturing, and comforting them. These are spaces where people can gather and sense an ambience of grace in which any and all words might be uttered without fear and without having to appeal to dissimulation, which is required by semantic protocols that norm other spaces. From the deepest lament to loud doxologies, these are the places one is drawn to silence or mediation or to intone and shout without reserve, like a bold gospel song in the words of Langston Hughes:

\textit{Tambourines!}
\textit{Tambourines!}
\textit{Tambourines!}
\textit{To the glory of God!}
\textit{Tambourines!}
\textit{To glory!}

\textit{A gospel shout and a gospel song:}
\textit{Life is short}
\textit{But God is long!}
\textit{Tambourines!}
\textit{Tambourines!}
\textit{Tambourines!}
\textit{To glory!}\textsuperscript{16}

A holy space is a product of a community that gives it spirit, which breathes life into it: a poietic work that gives without reserve because the Gift, God surrendering Godself to space and time, to an hour and a place, was itself the Gift without reserve. And so it remains holy as long as this breath is alive, as long as it goes on breathing. Quite simply put, a holy place, as a place in which an epiphanic event happens, is holy insofar as the breath or Spirit that gives witness to our spirit is there to consecrate it—and we call it “spiritual presence.” There is no gift without a receiver. The monumental or archival value of a site might be an occasion, but only an occasion, for the Spirit to “con-spire” (symmartyrein, “bearing witness,” Rom 8:16) with our spirit in the gathering of the faithful, unable by themselves to induce the epiphany. Spaces of monumental and archival thickness do not have the vertical or doxological quality of a space built for the praise to whom all praise is due. Their thickness does not have the horizontal or communal quality of a space built for the people to commune and look into each other’s faces and find the other, as Bergman expressed it. And in every other there is always the Other.

There is a biblical story that conveys the meaning of such a space. In the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus goes to visit his friends Martha and Mary. Martha, the text tells us, is extremely busy taking care of the house and being a dedicated host, while Mary sits at Jesus’ feet and listens to him. The story’s main point is well taken when, upon Martha’s complaint that Mary is not helping her, Jesus tells her that she is too


busy with the tasks of the house, while Mary has chosen the most important thing. However, the other side of the story is equally worth paying attention to. Although Martha’s house was not the most important thing, it was indeed very important, for it provided the space that framed the encounter of Jesus and Mary. Martha’s house was the wrapping, the cover, the shield of the Gift, a space of safety and intimacy; it was a sanctuary, and the Holy One was there hosted.

A holy space is the frame in which healing takes place and is celebrated. It does not belong to the ultimate, nor is it of the essence, but it provides for a preliminary experience of salvation, which is what healing ultimately means. Holy places are *loci salutis*, places of salvation, places of shelter, places of nurturing. A holy place is the space where people gather, celebrate, nurture, and support each other in the real presence of divine mystery. The wrapping presents the Gift but covers, conceals, and protects it for the sake of the receiver. In receiving the Gift, one is also wrapped in it.

When I was working with landless peasants in Brazil, there was an occupation of land that we accompanied. After it happened, my colleague, a Roman Catholic priest, was with them helping to take care of all the immediate needs: water, tents, food, taking care of children and the sick. This was an enormous task, particularly critical in the first hours and days after the occupation. While my colleague was immersed in these activities, one of the leaders of the camp went up to him and said: "Father, do not worry—we can take care of all these needs. What we need you for is to gather us to celebrate and give thanks to God who has brought us safe to this place.” Even in the midst of apparent havoc, there was a place in which safety, healing, and communion could be celebrated and a doxology raised. It did not require much design: a cross made of two branches, an improvised table, a glass of water, and some bread. There was nothing more intimate and secluded than that celebration in the midst of an open field, a simple place within which people communed with grace.

Paul Robeson in his autobiography *Here I Stand* (which is not about Luther at the Diet of Worms in 1521!) presents us with a similar doxology. These are the words with which he opens his book. Envisage a proper architecture, a design, a building that would dignify and also shelter them:

I am a Negro. The house I live in is in Harlem. . . . Not far away is the house where my brother Ben lives: the parsonage of Mother A.M.E. Zion Church of which Ben has been pastor for many years. Next door to the parsonage is the church where on Sunday mornings I am united with the fellowship of thousands of my people, singing with them their songs, feeling the warmth of their handshakes and smiles. . . . Yes, I’ve got a home in that rock! I feel here the embrace of love. Hello, Paul—it’s good to see you! It’s good to have you back! And it’s good to be back. For this is my community. . . . Here I stand.”

An epiphanic space is the space where you can say boldly, “Here I stand, here I belong.”

A *practice of adjacency*. The third formal feature of a holy place is that it allow for a release, where a practice of engagement and of letting go takes place. An epiphanic place is welcoming but ends not in itself; it sends people forward. Such are the places in which experiences of healing do not arrest the soul (they are not addictive), they release one to go forth, encouraged and strengthened. The mount of transfiguration is not a dwelling place; one needs to go

down the mountain to everyday life. According to John 20, not even the safety of the upper room, where the disciples were gathered afraid of the people outside, can be an end in itself, even while Jesus was there, even when there was presence, parousia. Jesus, whose real presence sanctified the place, sent them out!

A holy place, as much as it gathers, nurtures, and fills with joy, also releases and sends people to the midst of life, to the heart of the world. But those who are sent have already been transformed; they leave these spaces renewed and changed. Holy places are places of metanoia. Metanoia does not transform people out of the world; it changes people for the world. This is at the very root meaning of the word ekklesia, which was borrowed by New Testament authors from the civic arena. It originally meant a gathering or assembly of citizens to decide or legislate on issues concerning public life. After the assembly was over, the people were sent back to the polis with the charge of implementing the decisions.

The features of the place of such an assembly need, therefore, to convey adjacency to the places where people live their everyday life, so that they can exit it to be healed and be transformed in order to return to it. This is the reason it is a place of metanoia, of turning around. Hence, it also has features of a locale, a space of transition, without denying its homely features. The Shabbat, which Luther took to be the symbolic institution of the church, is precisely this: a time and place of rest and nurturing, a home inserted in the midst of everyday life. Adjacency (adiacere) means lying by, suggesting at the same time a moment, state, and space of rest but with the impending accountability for the demands that lie near, that are adjacent. The wrapping is, finally, what one needs to leave behind after the gift has been received.

How does one design such a space? How does one build a place that has at the same time the features of protected enclosure and those of adjacency? Different contexts and sites pose different challenges and demand creative, that is, poietic, solutions. A final story that tells of a design that combines the architectural features of a place of safety and at the same time adjacency comes from another old legend.

In the old town in Munich stands the Marienkirche, planted in the heart of the Marienplatz, a very busy market at its splendor in the fifteenth century when the church was built. As one enters the nave of the church there is a paving stone in which you can see the imprint of a foot. Legend has it that the master builder was approached by the devil demanding that the church be consecrated to him. The master builder refused. The devil placed a bet: the master builder could have his way of being faithful to God if he could build a church that was at the same time filled with natural light but with no windows to be seen. If the church turned out dark, with little light from the outside coming in, the devil would win; and so it would also be if windows distracted and exposed people directly to the busy market outside. The master builder, with the limited technological resources of the fifteenth century, designed a church that from the entry of the nave is filled with

**A holy space is the frame in which healing takes place and is celebrated.**
natural light but without any windows to be seen. After construction was completed, the devil came to see the church and collect his spoils, expecting either a dark place or windows exposed to the gaze. Yet it had the light of adjacency and the warmth of a haven for the weary soul. In seeing the place and realizing that he had lost the bet, the devil in a rage trampled on the paving stone. And his footprint is there to this day. Go and see.

**Envisioning**

An epiphanic location is a place of vocation. However, and uniquely, it is a space of *con-*vocation, *ad-*vocation, and *pro-*vocation—a place that calls us to (con-vocation), holds us by one another (ad-vocation), and sends us forth (pro-vocation).

This is then the task before us when we set ourselves to design and create a wrapping for the Gift. Envision, imagine a spatial design—a physical construction, down to its ornaments, its music, shape, and color—that is fit to host the following scene: Two, three, maybe more women have the most devastating experience of their lives: they witness the beloved one being tortured and executed in an excruciatingly painful and shameful death (*mors turpissima*, “the vilest death,” Origen called it). They are there and see it all, as they also are eyewitnesses to the place his body is laid. Afterward, they go to the adjacent market to buy oil and herbs to prepare a balm to anoint a body in putrescence. But Shabbat comes, and they leave all chores for a day of rest, lament, prayers, and remembrance. Early the next day they go back to the streets toward the tomb to wrap with ointment the Gift presumed to have been lost.

Builders, masons, artists, musicians, architects, engineers, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, artisans of all crafts, get to work! Be the poets of a space worthy of hosting that very scene. Only do not forget a crucial detail that we already know: those women were heading for the most marvelous, albeit terrifying, surprise. So convey all of that. And when your work is done, the people should be able to say: I have seen a place others imagined.

—*This article was the opening lecture at the February 2003 Leadership Conference at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and was delivered at the construction site of the new Augustana Chapel.*