

1. Today we encounter three symbols that play outsize roles in many religious traditions—Judeo-Christian tradition particularly: A Holy House, A Holy War, and A Holy Meal.
  - A Holy House—A building designated as a special space for encounters with God—Solomon dedicating the Temple as a place for divine-human meeting.
  - A Holy War—A combat mission undertaken at divine command—the author of Ephesians, on God’s behalf, rousing the troops with a call to arms.
  - A Holy Meal—A communal celebration to nourish human life with divine life—Jesus, in John’s Gospel doubling down on His bold, blunt claim—*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.*

The Biblical narratives in which these three symbols are embedded come from different writers in different social-historical settings.

Each narrative has a many-layered back story of its own.

Yet, within our faith tradition, as in others, these symbols are connected.

A Holy House—where faithful followers come to meet with God and with each other.

A place FROM which the faithful depart into the tasks, the joys, the struggles of daily life; and TO which they return for rekindling their connection with Divine Presence.

Holy Warfare—where faith adherents, one way or another, confront and contend with forces always challenging, often hostile.

A Holy Meal—where faith family members draw sustenance and energy from the Sacred Source of Life on whom they individually and communally depend.

2. Holy Houses, Holy Wars, Holy Meals—in the history of religion, all three have played out—for better or worse—WITHIN traditions and ACROSS traditions.

Before asking *Better or worse—how and why?*—however, it’s well to reflect on just how odd each notion is.

Buildings, Battles, Banquets—as such, there’s nothing extraordinary about any of them.

- Construction materials and room furnishings—it’s all just stuff—and sacred buildings—temples—are made of stuff—like wood and stone, bricks and mortar, glass and textiles.
- Battles are conducted with weapons and tactics—and Holy Wars are thick with those.
- Banquets—celebratory meals—the bottom line in all is food and drink—though religious ritual meals sometimes seem to skimp on both.

(I remember my five-year-old niece, attending an Episcopal Communion near suppertime.

After downing her tiny wafer, in full voice, she bellowed: *I’m still hungry!*)

So where is the HOLY in the house—the war—the meal about which we’ve heard this morning?

If anything is “spiritual,” or “supernatural” there,

it isn’t evident—is it—by means of sight or sound, taste or touch, or smell?

No wonder sceptics conclude, regarding the Holy, that “there’s no THERE there.”

3. Holy Dwellings, Holy Warfare, Holy Feasts—

Maybe what's HOLY isn't in the things themselves,  
but in what those involved WITH them bring TO them.

The "Holy" character is, perhaps, imported by participants—  
all coming with common focus, intention, and investment.

Yet these commitments also operate in many other everyday activities and edifices—

- museums and concert halls house artifacts and events that visitors highly value
- athletic contests and political campaigns are fiercely fought—with winners and losers
- birthday parties and retirement gatherings are occasions for festive eating and drinking.

Yet none are usually described as HOLY.

BUT—in each of the Scripture texts we've heard, something MORE is claimed—

about the meeting house—the conflict—the food and drink—that each is sacred—

that all are somehow concerned with—and permeated by—the presence and power of God.

And venues for human response to what is perceived as "the call of God."

4. And it is precisely this sense of disconnect—

how ORDINARY the appearances, but how EXTRAORDINARY the claims—

- that easily gives rise to the skepticism  
of those who hold religious tradition at arm's length.
- and that easily gives rise, on the part of some true believers,  
to the use of such presumed Divine Presence Points  
in ways that are very UNholy, indeed.

We needn't dwell long on clear examples of the Holy as seriously misappropriated:

- Holy Wars as *Crusades or Ideological Purges*
- Holy Houses as *Fortresses, Bunkers, or Magic Kingdom Castles*
- Holy Meals as *Cozy, Intimate Private Dinners at Clubs for Members Only*

HOLY as *invoking God to validate and sanction our special interests,*

rather than HOLY as *God reaching out to dignify all of creation*

*and God raising us to NEW Life by infusing us with the energy of DIVINE Life.*

What I find remarkable in the sacred texts we have heard today

is that none just sports an image onto which I can project my notions of what is holy.

In each case, the text suggests what it is that "sanctifies" the House, the War, the Meal—

what sets it apart for encounters with God that can be life-transforming.

These texts suggest benchmarks that concentrate and circumscribe

the meaning of the symbols—

and criteria that shape behavior and practice

for those who are called to be God's Holy People.

5. Holy Meal—Throughout the "Bread of Life" discourse we've been hearing for several weeks,

Jesus takes pains to say that the Bread from Heaven he offers—

the Energy that, having called the world to life, now calls it into New Life—

this Soul Sustaining Food is, in fact, for the WHOLE WORLD—not just for a CHOSEN FEW.

But, essential to our life though it is, this Holy Meal is no force feeding.

The offer Jesus makes is urgent but not coercive.

No one is ever TURNED AWAY from the table; but no one is ever DRAGGED TO it either.

Food only truly satisfies when we are both hungry for, and ready for it.

The disciple-interns of Jesus we've heard about today are clearly NOT ready for it.

*This is just too hard!* they complain. *We'd be happy to have the power of God at our disposal; but we don't want God up close and personal—transforming US into the KIND of HOLY Jesus is.*

So they up and leave.

*Will you also go away?* Jesus asks the Twelve, offering them an out as well.

*NO,* says Peter, *You ARE the source of the Life we need—we'll stick around for your Holy Food.*

6. Holy Meal—Holy House—In his prayer of temple dedication, Solomon could not be clearer.

God meets us in sacred dwelling places, but at God's initiative, not on our demand.

As Jesus in John's Gospel puts it: It is God, and only God who draws us;

but God's Presence will not be dictated BY us.

And—just because God MEETS us here, it does not follow that God is HOUSEBOUND here.

And—if it won't do for us to keep God IN this place—neither will it do for us to keep others OUT.

What Jesus offers to the world in sacred food, Solomon sees God offering in sacred shelter—and not just to members of the Covenant.

This temple, Solomon says, is not for Insiders Only, it offers a welcome that is world-wide.

Holy Food and Holy Shelter—Symbols of Divine Hospitality—points of invitation, not exclusion.

7. Holy Meal—Holy House—Holy War—this the most challenging of all, of course—there have been so many that have been so deadly.

I suspect most of us don't readily salute the image of an "Onward CHRISTIAN Soldier," to say nothing of one outfitted in the battle dress of an ancient ROMAN soldier.

One can make a good case, however, for saying that the author of Ephesians,

is, in fact, for the listeners of his day, explicitly, deliberately deconstructing and subverting the Roman soldier image, and revisioning the very idea of war.

Did you notice? All the armor, save the sword, is for protection, for defense.

Did you notice? The armor pieces are explicitly named as qualities

that, if embraced, render war as usually conducted unnecessary, even impossible—

THESE armor pieces are in stark opposition to the very objectives of conquest and subjugation.

Did you notice the call to action? It is not *In God's power—ATTACK,*

but *In God's power—STAND.*

And did you notice that when God's soldiers are ordered to "Move Out"—

it is on shoes specifically designed to support a mission of proclaiming the Good News of Peace?

And did you notice one thing more? The author explicitly declares:

*we struggle NOT against the enemies of blood and flesh, but against cosmic powers, spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places.*

What a tragedy, when, by demonizing fellow human sisters and brothers—in the name of God—we aid and abet the very force of the demonic—however that force is understood.

The one offensive weapon this author mentions?

The Sword of the Spirit—the spirit that discerns and differentiates what is deeply true from that which is a fake, a counterfeit, a wile of the devil.

If the author of Ephesians is right, what passes for a Holy War, has almost always been an exercise in warfare lethally misdirected—fighting the wrong battles—dying on the wrong hills.

But that does not mean there is no such thing as a valid, necessary Spiritual Struggle—what philosopher William James once called “the moral equivalent of war”.

8. Holy Meal, Holy House, Holy Warfare—

granted how complex these symbols are, and how easily they can be misrepresented—it would be tempting to follow the sceptic—to simply say: *Holy? There's no THERE there.*

But, standing at the intersecting trajectories of these three strange sacred texts,

I am drawn to the prospect of distinctive Divine Presence Points that bear witness to a God who transcends the world for the purpose of engaging and transforming it.

Engaging US with an Energy that neither discounts nor overwhelms us.

Yet not an Energy that blesses us blandly with: *Hey—do WHATEVER—that's just fine!*

NO—we are engaged by a Holy Energy that touches and transforms human life with an empowering invitation to share, and to rise into God's Own Very Life.

An Energy that invites us—in and through to ordinary-seeming activities—sheltering, nourishing, and struggling—

invites us into an extraordinary dimension of life that bears the name of HOLY.

Because of our trust in this Divine Energy we keep coming back here week after week—to shelter in faith, to share food in faith, to struggle in faith—to encounter God in faith.

All this through a Holy House, a Holy Meal, and, yes, an ongoing Holy Warfare—in actions that make a world renewing difference—

because, in each and all of these, we believe that God is HERE.

And so we pray: *Oh God, who wonderfully created,*

*and yet more wonderfully restored the dignity of human nature*

*Grant that we may share the divine life of Him who humbled himself to share our humanity.*

*Jesus Christ, Our Lord, who lives, and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,*

*One God, forever and ever.*