

Last Sunday on my vacation we took a tour of a house in Springfield that had been designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and built in 1902. It's one of the top 20 things to do in Illinois, as you'll see if you read the tourism websites, and definitely one of the top 20 things to do in Springfield. I am ambivalent about Frank Lloyd Wright. I've seen some of his smaller houses, like the one in Quasqueton, and I find them cramped and dark. Why, if you're a big-shot architect, do you need to design a kitchen as if it were in a railway car? Why build those big roof overhangs when winter in the Midwest is already so dark? Plus, Wright was famously a control freak, prescribing not only the architecture but the furniture of a house. He wouldn't let you hang paintings on his walls because his walls were art, so he'd make you get some folding tables where you could lay your paintings out flat. AND he had a grand disregard for little things like freeze-and-thaw cycles, causing his famous Fallingwater house in Pennsylvania to begin to need structural repairs within 20 years of being built.

On the other hand, offer me a tour of a Frank Lloyd Wright house, and I'm first in line. I *always* want to see it. He thought about everything, and I love seeing what he paid attention to.

So we went to see the Dana Thomas house in Springfield, which is ginormous—built for a woman who gave Wright an unlimited budget. I sneered as the tour guide showed us the front room, where Wright had put a big fireplace to be the heart of the house. It's a thing of beauty, but there's almost no room to sit by it—just two small settees on the sides. Typical Wright, I said to whichever family member had accidentally stood next to me, pretty but unusable. They edged away.

Next we saw the dining room, which, as you enter, has a fairly low ceiling, but once

you're properly in, the ceiling soars, creating a sense of drama, as the guide explained. The dining tables, when put together, can seat 40 guests. At the end of the room is a drop-dead gorgeous ceiling-to-floor window of stained glass, suggestive of a dragonfly. My complaints began to dry up.

I'll spare you the whole tour, which you really should just go to Springfield and take at your earliest opportunity. My point here is that despite my excellent and practical criticisms, the beauty of the house just took over. And the guide told us about the owner, too, Susan Dana Thomas, who had rather a sad personal life but who was kind and generous with her home. She had a library which was open to all the children in the neighborhood, and she would put up a Christmas tree with presents for the children every year. Sometimes she'd host lectures or musicales in this library (in which the paintings were displayed on folding tables, thank you very much), and one time, to entertain the children, she converted the long planter in the hallway into a goldfish habitat. She sounds like a sweet, creative, neighborly lady.

So when I read about Solomon's building of the Temple this week, I was less crabby about it than usual. Usually I would be pointing out things like Solomon's mixed motives and his geopolitical ambitions. Our lection leaves out some of the hairier details, like the fact that Solomon promised to pay King Hiram seven months' worth of food for his court *every year in perpetuity* in exchange for those terrific cedar timbers they grew in Lebanon. There was some kind of crony capitalism going on there. It leaves out the fact that Solomon conscripted forced labor from his own subjects to build the Temple—they had to go to Lebanon for one month, then get two months at home, then back to Lebanon. This has to have put a big dent in their household budgets, being away from their own work so much. But it was beautiful. And you

can tell that the narrator, writing either during the doomed reign of the reformer Josiah, or during the dark days of the Babylonian Exile, remembers the Temple very fondly indeed. Chapter 6 is all tour guide descriptions of its beauty, from the gourds and open flowers carved into the walls to the ten-cubit cherubim carved out of olivewood that guarded the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. This extravagant Temple, built with conscripted labor at unreasonable expense, was gorgeous and unique and the object of pride for every single subject in the kingdom. And it was a thin place—a place where the presence of God would be felt.

The Temple was built on Mount Moriah where, had it not been for God's intervention, Abraham would have sacrificed his son Isaac. It was built on land that David had purchased at God's command, to make a sacrifice to avert the death angel. It was built on land where, despite dire circumstances with death on the horizon, life prevailed. After it had been built, Solomon waited until the feast of booths to inaugurate it by bringing in the Ark and the holy vessels and the folded-up tent of meeting which had been the Ark's shelter during all the years of wandering in the wilderness. With this timing, Solomon evoked the history of being a homeless people, carrying their sacred object from place to place, and he tied it to this new, established place.

Inside the Ark are the tablets of the Law, given to Moses. If this were any other religion, the Ark would contain a representation of their god. But Israel's god can't be represented visually; instead, the Torah is the embodiment of God on earth. And although people can come to the Temple and experience the presence of God, God cannot be contained in this Temple. In fact, think about this: a temple and priests exist to sort of buffer human beings from the raw

holiness of God, whose presence would kill us if it were not mediated through them. And yet when the priests came out of the holy place where they'd put the Ark, the cloud of the glory of the Lord filled the Temple so that the priests themselves could not stand to minister. It knocked *them* down. That's how powerful the holiness of God was in this new holy place.

In the center of the Dana Thomas house that Frank Lloyd Wright designed is a small Victorian parlor. Susan Dana's father had owned the house on this lot, and for tax purposes, she had Wright save that one room so that the build qualified as a remodeling. From the splendid dining room you move into this Victorian parlor, dark and crowded with plush upholstered furniture. When you progress through into the Wright-designed living area, the simple lines and natural colors are a relief. You begin to see how fresh Wright's design would have felt in 1902.

When Solomon built the Temple, it was a kind of Reformation. It's as if he were saying, We came from wanderers, and they came from slavery, but that's not us any more. We're here, we're the covenant community come to a new level of maturity, and we're going to act like it. It was time for Israel to stop thinking of themselves as nomad followers of a nomad god, and take on the responsibility of a *built* place of worship that would offer a thin place to all comers, a mediated encounter with the Holy One. Along with that responsibility came the risk of corruption, which is what we tend to see when we read the New Testament, the memory of which obscures the gorgeousness and bravery of this Temple at the beginning. This was an act of daring. By building the Temple, Solomon was declaring that there was going to be more to Israel than the chronic state of emergency that had characterized their ancestors. Now God was going to write new chapters in their story, from a new place of splendor appropriate to the

magnitude and power of God.

And on this Reformation Sunday, we do well to look back at where we have come from and who we have come from with gratitude—and with thanks that we are being led further, into new chapters. When Martin Luther challenged the corruptions of the Roman church, it was a necessary and important moment. But this is a different moment, in which people of various faiths are looking for points of contact and mutual appreciation. Now we want to position ourselves to notice and make friends with people unlike ourselves, expecting that those relationships will reveal God more fully to us so that we can be better partners in mending the world. I love how Solomon brought forward the memory of wandering by inaugurating the Temple on Sukkot, and how they folded up the old tent of meeting and brought it into the Temple along with the Ark. We should hold onto our formative history that way too. And at the same time, we should always hold an awareness that God is always innovating, still speaking, as it were, and calling us into a role in the world that fits the current moment.

Let us pray.

God, the splendor of Solomon's Temple was a thin place through which many of your people felt your presence. Show us thin places for our time, and help us to clear the way to them, so that all may experience your kindness, your generosity, your splendor. Amen.