

Getting Ready reflection: January 2009

“Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans?”

Place matters. It matters a great deal in the Old Testament. God tells Moses to remove his shoes because the *place* on which he stands is holy ([Exodus 3:5](#)). The desert becomes a holy place in which God consecrates—calls and dedicates—the Israelites as God’s own people ([Exodus 19:10 – 20:21](#)). The consecration in this holy place becomes one step on the way to God fulfilling God’s promise to bring God’s people to a new place, the Promised Land ([Exodus 3:17](#)). In fact, place is so important to the Israelites that they mark the very place on the Jordan River where they crossed into the Promised Land with a pile of stones in order that future generations might never forget what happened in that place ([Joshua 4:1-24](#)).

We might read these stories and begin to think they imply that God is only present in one particular place at any given time. However, looking again at Israel’s history, we see this myth of a “geographically challenged God” debunked when Israel is taken into Exile.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

The Israelites are no longer in the place God had promised them, yet God is present with them in this place and encourages them to embrace this strange place as home; where they might continue to dwell with God as God’s people.

The incarnation, God becoming flesh in Jesus Christ ([John 1:1-18](#)), continues to expand and locate the holiness of place. God is no longer tied only to the Promised Land or to the Israelites in exile. God is now located in the physical flesh of a human and becomes real in our physical places. Along these lines, John Inge argues for a relational-sacramental understanding of place as a physical location in which Christ meets us just as Christ is present in the physical wine and bread of communion and the physical waters of baptism. Actual places “. . . can be thought of as the seat of relations, or the places of meeting and activity in the interaction between God and the world.”¹

New Orleans is a real place. Real people live there and call it home. Countless numbers of people have experienced God’s physical presence in New Orleans. They have been born there, baptized there, married there, and celebrated there. They have gone to school there, graduated there, communed there, been tempted there, been forgiven there, and they have died there.

We generally fail to consider the realness and the holiness of the places we encounter when we travel. We might take in the tourist attractions, eat at the famous restaurants, and maybe even take a bus tour. But we often fail to view these locations sacramentally as physical places in which God meets real people. In July, we will enter New Orleans with our shoes off, as holy people entering a holy place where other holy people encounter our real God in very real ways.

¹John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 58.