

Pentecost 26C/Reformation  
Peace, Seattle  
October 30, 2016  
Psalm 84:1-7, Luke 19:1-10

## **NESTING**

“Even the sparrow finds a home and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young at your altars, O God.”<sup>1</sup>

**This quote from Psalm 84, set beside Sarah and Melanie’s words, provides a fitting frame for Week 1 of our 3-week focus on our lives as stewards.**

The psalmist points us to the swallow, inviting us to imagine her there, high above the Temple’s altar, building her nest where post and beam intersect. And in our mind’s eye we can see her, can we not? Swooping past massive stones into the niche tailor made for her nest.

**I like the psalmist’s choice of bird, because of all the birds I love to watch, the swallow may be my favorite.**

- I love their sleek, agile bodies and scissored tails.
- I recall evenings up at Holden in the village square, watching them make swooping turns in an aerial ballet—while snatching dinner from a buffet of airborne insects.

Just as the bodies of birds evolve to complement their unique way of being in the world, so too has each species arrived at a method of building a nest that will provide the best structure, safety, and nurture for their young—in short the best way to form them into healthy offspring who will not only survive but thrive.

Barn swallows construct their nests from mud pellets they collect in their beaks, traveling up to a half-mile to gather ingredients from ponds, puddles, and ditches. A finished nest could contain 1,000 pellets or more—each one representing a trip to and from the nest. And once the basic structure is in place more trips are made to complete the nest’s inner lining of grass, hair, & feathers.<sup>2</sup>

Those of us who’ve made countless trips with our children to daycare, school, team practices and games, music lessons, doctor and dentist appointments, and the like, can empathize with the investment of time and labor required for swallows to prepare and nurture our young ones, can we not?

**Today is Reformation Sunday.** But before you can engage in RE-formation, you must first engage in FORMATION.

Throughout this year we’ve been witnessing the first stage of faith formation as we’ve baptized seven little ones—3 of them last week—welcoming them into the family of God.

**They’re in the nest now!** And it’s our job—collectively—to accompany these children, coming alongside their parents and sponsors, (and the Holy Spirit, too) so that the trust forming within them becomes a resource for the long haul. A faith that accompanies them when the time comes for them to step out of the nest. A faith that will be there when it’s time for them to build a nest of their own.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 84:3

<sup>2</sup> <http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/swallows.html>

Last month our family was privileged to witness another faith formation in process when we attended the bar mitzvah of one of Kai's classmates, a young man named Ethan.<sup>3</sup>

A bar mitzvah (or bat mitzvah for girls) is a coming of age ceremony in the Jewish tradition that marks the time a young person becomes an adult in the Jewish community. Ethan's bar mitzvah took place at Temple De Hirsch Sinai on Capital Hill.

Gathering in the chapel, we watched Ethan lead the service with the Rabbi's help, reading and chanting in Hebrew, and even giving a short sermon on his particular Torah portion. Throughout the service he wore the new TALLIT or prayer shawl his parents had presented to him at the beginning—and it was a large one—one he'll be growing into for a long time to come.

The spirit of the whole evening was layered with meaning, but the most powerful part of the service, for me, was when Ethan's grandparents came forward to present him with a TALLIT BAG for his shawl, a bag that had belonged to his great grandfather Isie Goldstein.

The prayer shawl will accompany Ethan for the rest of his life—in fact, he will one day be buried in it. But the bag in which he stores and carries it is something that can be passed between generations.

When the time came to present Ethan with the bag, Ethan's grandmother came forward to remind him who his great grandfather was. And to say to Ethan, in a sense, this is who you are.

Isie was born in the U.S. in 1902, but after the death of his father he returned to Europe with his mother and siblings while still a child. Isie and his younger brother came back to the States after WWI, but his other siblings and most of his mother's extended family remained in Europe. They were there when Hitler came to power and began his quest to conquer the world and destroy the Jewish people.

The only members of Esie's family to survive the Holocaust were his aunt Clara, Clara's son Alex—who had been one of 13 children—and Clara's grandson, Harold.

Isie was the family patriarch, and so it was he who came to the aid of Clara, Alex, and Harold when they sought refuge in the U.S. after the war. For years they all shared the same New York City apartment where Isie lived with his wife and daughter. His kindness was never forgotten.

Now, Esie's daughter—Ethan's grandmother—was here at Ethan's bar mitzvah to present him with the very tallit bag that had accompanied Esie all those years.

**When the prophet Jeremiah says of the new covenant:**

I WILL PUT MY LAW WITHIN THEM AND WRITE IT ON THEIR HEARTS,  
AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.

...he's saying their FORMATION as God's people will be etched and integrated so deeply within them that nothing will be able to get between them and their relationship with GOD.

That's the kind of FAITH FORMATION we want to be part of here at Peace!

499 years ago an Augustinian monk fastened 95 Theses to the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Some of us have been studying those 95 theses the past month. What we've learned is that Martin

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<sup>3</sup> I'm grateful to Jessie, Ethan's mother, for sharing the story with me and giving permission to share it with others.

Luther's motivation in criticizing the sale of indulgences was largely a pastoral one—that is, he was concerned that the Church, with its practices, was mal-forming faith.

Luther wanted the Church to form faith in ways that were truthful, clear, and lifegiving; ways that called people to account when they went astray, and, after they realized their error, offered them the pure food of the gospel in order to lead them back to Christ.

As Luther matured he saw the importance of the Church coming alongside parents and educating and preparing them so that they in turn could, with the Spirit's aid, provide the best nest and the most appropriate teaching wherein faith would be formed.

Parishes and congregations all across the world, including this one, carry on that ministry to this day.

- Our congregation is more than a place of fellowship—though fellowship is essential to our life together.
- Our congregation is more than a community which comes alongside neighbors in need—though this ministry is central to our call.
- Our congregation is more than a place where people gather for worship—though worship lies at the heart of our mission.

**Our congregation is a place where faith is formed;** a NEST in which faith comes to birth and is fed and nourished so that each of us—from age two months to 92+—can be nurtured and provided with what we need to move toward spiritual maturity, to grow wings, to leave the nest, and, finally, to soar.

The world is inundated with books, apps, products, programs—all sorts of “expert” advice—intent on showing us how to raise our children. These voices are eager for us to turn our children over to them so they can form them toward their own end.

**But there is another Voice—a Voice which calls us to lives of faith, hope, and love.**

The choices we make, the way we form our young ones and provide for them matters.

On the final leg of his journey to Jerusalem Jesus goes through Jericho, where he encounters first a blind beggar and then, a man named Zacchaeus, leaving them both forever changed.

We don't know much of Zacchaeus' back-story, but on the surface it seems that for much of his adult life, Zacchaeus has worshipped at the altar of me and mine.

Collecting taxes from fellow Jews on behalf of Roman occupiers not only marked him as disloyal, it made Zacchaeus a kind of parasite: he made his living by riding on the backs of others.

**He had everything money could buy but was totally isolated from his own community. Until, that his, his encounter with Jesus. When Jesus comes to town, he spots Zacchaeus up in the tree and invites himself to his home.**

**Luke doesn't tell us the precise details of what happened next; but he does tell us the outcome.**

In his single encounter with Jesus, the mal-formation that had dominated Zacchaeus' life, the god of greed he had worshipped and slaved for all those years was suddenly and irrevocably gone.

LORD! He pledges, HERE AND NOW I GIVE HALF OF MY POSSESSIONS TO THE POOR,  
AND IF I'VE CHEATED ANYBODY—I'LL PAY IT BACK FOURFOLD!

**This encounter is remarkable not only for what Zacchaeus says but for what Jesus DOESN'T say: There's no judging. No reprimand. Not even a call for repentance.**

Only the reality of acceptance and the promise of authentic relationship. And that proves to be transforming.

**Zacchaeus thought he had everything! But in Jesus he discovered his true need:**

- To be welcomed and to welcome
- To be loved and to love
- To be converted from a life of self-service in order to be formed for a life of servicing others

TODAY, says Jesus, TODAY SALVATION HAS COME TO THIS HOUSE, FOR THE SON OF MAN CAME TO SEEK AND TO SAVE WHAT WAS LOST.

**Jesus broke the bread of abundance as he dined with Zacchaeus and we are still fed from those loaves every time we come to the Lord's Table.**

**Every time the bread and cup of Jesus are lifted up, the world's mal-formation is turned upside down. Every time we take in the bread and wine, the faith that has formed us is re-formed and renewed.**

What more can we say than, Thanks be to God!

Amen.