

## **Journey to the Cathedral**

*Psalm 84; 1 Corinthians 3*

Sid Batts

First Presbyterian Church  
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Do you remember the first time you walked into this sanctuary? Or, the first time you saw the exterior of this *mighty fortress*?

If you grew up here, you might have thought this is what all sanctuaries look and feel like. But for those of us who did not, we experienced something akin to *wow* as our first impressions of this place.

A music professor from UNCG told me about bringing his students here to practice for a Christmas concert. Many of those students, he said, were from small towns and rural areas and he watched them as they entered for the first time from the Greene Street door.....and saw their eyes rise to the ceiling and the surroundings, and then the awe on their faces.

Perhaps what we all know is that this sanctuary is an extraordinary treasure that we inherited from our forebears of the 1920s; but a treasure so important to us that when it came time to renovate this sacred space, we put our time, energy and money into restoring and bringing the infrastructure up to date. This year we were presented a Preservation Award by Greensboro's Preservation Society because of our renovating work.

Our sanctuary is known by others. Somewhere along the line, this sanctuary earned the name, *The Cathedral of the Piedmont*. And if you've ever seen those coffee table books that feature North Carolina churches, this sanctuary is always included. If you take Duke Chapel out of the mix, this sanctuary is the most impressive expression of Gothic church architecture in North Carolina. And of course, Duke Chapel, is not really a congregation in the ordinary sense, but a chapel for Duke students. (Of course, I have never understood how you could call that cathedral a chapel, which infers a quaint worship space.)

If this sounds like I am tooting our horn, you are exactly right. I am sinfully proud to be the pastor of a congregation who had the vision to build an awesome, inspiring, majestic Protestant cathedral in a relatively small southern city, which in 1929, had a mere thirty thousand residents. But I am even more proud that we focused our energy, time and money to renovate. Our motive, of course, was not merely preservation. No, we believe our future is more

important than our past, and our renovation positions us for the vibrant ministry of the twenty-first century.

Back in the fall of 2000, when our two teenage daughters first saw this sanctuary, one of them said: "I am so getting married here." And they both did about ten years ago, and within a span of four months. That's another story!

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Part of the story behind this sanctuary takes us to France, and back to the medieval period of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Many of you know some of this story. If you don't, consider it part of your family history, sort of churchancestry.com.

This sanctuary was designed by noted New York architect Hobart Upjohn in the 1920s. He was assisted by local architect Harry Barton, who was also an elder and the Clerk of Session. This is one of five Gothic church sanctuaries Upjohn designed in North Carolina. One of those is First Presbyterian in Wilmington and if you have ever walked into that sanctuary, though it is smaller in scale, you are immediately struck with the similarity in that place and ours.

Upjohn designed this sanctuary based on, or inspired by, the Cathedral of Saint Cecilia in Albi, France, which is in the Tarn region of Southern France. Knowing that our sanctuary was inspired by this French cathedral, it has always been my hope to take a group of First Presbyterians to see *our* cathedral. Two weeks ago, twenty-three First Presbyterians, plus two siblings of members, left for France to make our journey to the cathedral.

It has been renamed the Albi Cathedral. It is listed as one of France's most important historical architectural sites. Construction to build the cathedral began in the year 1282 and it was under construction for two-hundred years. It is claimed to be the largest brick building in Europe. And others say, in the world.

The Brick Gothic Cathedral was completed in 1480, that's a dozen years before Columbus arrived in the New World. The cathedral's dominant presence and fortress-like exterior was intended to convey the power and authority of the Christian faith. That's because the church (Catholic) was dealing with a group called the Cathars, who were considered a heretical group. It depends on what you read or who describes the Cathars as to who exactly they were. Some describe them as a benignly precursor to Protestant groups that wanted a simpler religion, like the Quakers or Mennonites. However, a closer look reveals the Cathars as a non-Christian group. They rewrote the biblical story and replaced it with an elaborate mythology. They

rejected the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, that is, (God becoming human.) Jesus, therefore, was to them merely an angel; and his human sufferings and death were an illusion. They also criticized the worldliness and corruption of the Catholic Church.

The Cathars believed that human beings were aliens in an evil world; therefore their human purpose was to free the human spirit, which would restore communion with God. They were ascetics, renouncing the world; they had strict rules for fasting, including the prohibition of meat. Sexual intercourse was forbidden and they devoted themselves to contemplation and were expected to maintain the highest moral standards.

Now we hear much about the crusades that the mediaeval Church waged against Islam, particularly in Jerusalem, but the church also waged a crusade against the Cathars in the twelfth century; though there were pockets of Cathars all over Europe, most lived in this area of France. When the crusade succeeded in ridding the region of the Cathars, the church built a mighty cathedral, St. Cecil, in Albi. That it looked like a fortress was a visible statement of the power of the Christian church. Its bell tower rises two hundred fifty feet over any threat of heresy that stood to distort the truth of God.

And indeed, when you see Albi Cathedral, it has an imposing presence of power and dominance.

We, of course, live in a different day and our theology shudders at the thoughts of crusades or waging war against those who believe differently. Indeed, our American ideals are constructed on the freedom of religion, and that people be free to worship and believe as we wish. But the medieval times saw it differently.

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Our group spent time in the cathedral, listening to guides explain the history, the church's architecture and its symbolism. The cathedral is built in what historians call the Southern Gothic Style, which was different from the traditional Gothic style in the north that had constructed French Cathedrals such as Notre Dame in Paris, and Chartres, and St. Michaels in Normandy. And one of the unique features of Albi, is that it was built in brick. Indeed, Albi is sometimes called the Rouge City, because brick is prominent and indigenous to the region. In most areas, cathedrals were built of stone.

Now you have heard me talk about the difference in a journey and a pilgrimage. A spiritual journey is an important metaphor for our lives of faith. We are on a journey, the road of faith, traveling, growing, learning, serving. Pilgrimage, however, is a term most associated with Catholicism because there is a belief that certain places or buildings have a holiness that

embodies the mysterious presence of God. Protestants are uncomfortable with the idea that a place could be more holy than another because we believe that God is not confined to geography. Which I'm okay with. But it is certainly true, at least for me, that certain places inspire my spiritual imagination and bring me into the presence of God. This place for instance. The old Celtic spiritualists had the term called *thin places* which described places where the boundaries between heaven and earth collapsed, and became so thin, that one could experience the presence of God.

When we were in Albi, I had a sense that we were on a pilgrimage, visiting a thin place. But it was a pilgrimage not just for ourselves. No, I sensed we were vicariously carrying with us all the First Presbyterians past and present, indeed anyone who has been spiritually blessed by this sacred space — in worship, a wedding, a funeral, a baptism, Christmas Eve or Easter worship. It was for me like researching our family history, going back generations, and standing in a place where our ancient ancestors once stood. Because somehow connecting to my past is important for my present. Often we understand better who we are by understanding who they were. Being in Albi was like finding ancient cousins with whom we share spiritual DNA.

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Lastly, church architecture is an interesting and often controversial subject among religious folks and worshippers. Though we heard Paul talk to the Corinthians using architectural terms, that is, they were a *building of God*, he was using a metaphor to point to the stability and strength of Christian life. Truth is there is no prescribed biblical architecture for churches or sanctuaries. You won't find any architectural plans for how God's house should be built. But through the centuries, church structures have evolved and along with it a theological lens for the construction of sanctuaries for the worship of God. There is a small field of thought called the theology of church architecture. Now, one would find it hard to believe that a theology of Christian architecture has been present in American Protestant churches of the last fifty years. Rather we see generic warehouse type churches being a dominant model. And for many, the term *sanctuary* has been replaced by a *worship space*. The trend has been that of a multi-purpose sanctuary where gyms, auditoriums and theaters are turned into worship spaces. If beauty or aesthetics are the criteria, I dare say that in the last fifty years, the number of beautiful or aesthetically pleasing sanctuaries built is a small percentage of the whole.

Some of this is because we Americans are so functional that it seems pragmatic that space be used for various purposes. But the downside of functional, multiuse space is that such spaces do not, in and of themselves, communicate something of the extraordinary nature of God. Some say that sanctuaries of today focus on God's people whereas sanctuaries of a previous day focused on God. That in and of itself is a controversial statement.

We Protestants are inclined to see worship as preaching, reading scripture, music, singing and praying. So if a worship space can provide for those things, then often we are ready to sign off on the aesthetics.

So the question we might ask is can those things (preaching, scripture, music and prayer) stand alone in shaping our hearts and our faith?

What a sanctuary can do, by its very aesthetics and design is be a visual witness to God's immanence, God's transcendence, God's mystery and God's majesty. In that way a sanctuary seeks to capture our imagination so that we can intuitively understand these things about God. This holy architecture seeks to capture our eyes and senses to realign our hearts and minds with God.

Which is to say, that in a place like this, the building itself speaks of God and faith. Even if a sermon does not reach you where you are, or if the prayers do not connect you with God or the music does not soar, a sanctuary, with its holy architecture can bring us into the presence of God. And for that, I am thankful.