

The Temple
March 3, 2024
John 2:13-22
The Third Sunday in Lent

Dear Friends in Christ,

It was easy to identify the temple in Jerusalem: It was the magnificent building made of stone, divided into two rooms. A wall enclosed the courtyard that contained an altar for sacrifice and a basin for washing. The place was guarded carefully as ceremonies were conducted. The furnishings were ornate and of quality craftsmanship, each detail dictated by God.

But what made it the temple? There were other big buildings made of stone. There were other courtyards surrounded by walls. Animals were slaughtered elsewhere, too, and guards stood in front of other places. What made this the temple? Well, this is what made it the temple: God was there. This was His house. When the temple was completed by Solomon, we are told that the Lord entered the Holy of Holies in a cloud of glory. In 1st Kings, chapter 8 we are told that after the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the temple, "and when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord." God lived there, hidden behind a thick curtain, present with His people. If they wanted to find God, they went to the temple: That's where He promised to be. That's what made it the temple: As Jesus said, it was His Father's house.

The temple was the temple because God lived there. Everything at the temple was designed to point to one of two things: First, that God lived there with His people; that's why sacrifices were offered at the temple, not somewhere else. Second, those sacrifices proclaimed that the people would be saved from their sins by a sacrifice: Those sacrifices pointed to Jesus, the Son of God, the Sacrifice for the sins of the world. That building was a monument to the faithfulness of God. But the Israelites forgot: If God left, it was just another building, no matter what it looked like.

So it happened in the Old Testament. As the nation of Israel decayed, the priests took their duties for granted, sloppily going about their ceremonies or neglecting them. By their actions, they declared that the Lord's presence didn't matter all that much. This opened the way for further trouble: Once the people decided that the Lord's presence wasn't all that special, it made perfect sense to permit other gods who allowed more freedom and flexibility for their lives. Gradually, idols and graven images were brought into their land and then even into the temple itself; it seemed reasonable to expect that the one true God would share His holy space with others.

But that was not the case. As prophesied by Ezekiel, the Lord left the temple. He does not force His grace and presence on anyone, nor does He share His glory with false gods. If the people didn't want Him as their Help and Salvation, fine; He would simply withdraw and let their false, dead gods look after them. So He did. The Lord withdrew from that building; but because of the blindness of idolatry, few in Israel even noticed. They still had the building, so God must be there; but He wasn't. They didn't want Him, so He'd left. It came as quite a shock to some when the Babylonians came through and destroyed the temple building: How could it happen if God was there? Answer: He wasn't.

But He'd be back, present with His people to save. The temple would be rebuilt, then rebuilt again at the time of King Herod. God would still dwell with His people, hiding His glory behind stone walls and a thick curtain.

But then He'd do something even better: The temple would come to the temple. This brings us to our Gospel lesson. Remember: The temple is where God is present with His people. Remember this, too: It's possible to destroy the temple but keep the building, and at the time of Christ it is happening again. The temple grounds have been turned into a marketplace: Trade in your animal for a better one to be sacrificed-for a cost, of course. Change your money into the official temple coinage-with a surcharge, naturally.

The focus of the temple is no longer on God's gracious presence. The message to the worshiper is that God loves him if only he pays enough money. Jesus has a solution. He fashions a whip out of cords and drives the merchants from the temple: "Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise," He declares as He runs them off. In passing, we note that the Lord is not opposed to physical force when applied for just reasons. Note the Lord's accusation: They are turning God's house into a store. The focus is not on the Lord and His free grace. The focus is on man's work of striking a deal and making a profit.

God is still present there -- Jesus still calls the temple His "Father's house;" but once again, the Lord is being made to feel unwelcome. Those in charge of the temple-market are less than amused with Jesus' words and actions. "What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?" they demand. They are convinced that they have a good program going, one that benefits the temple; and they are convinced that Jesus has actually harmed the work of the Lord by condemning their program. This Jesus had better give a good reason fast as to why revenge should not be swift and violent.

Jesus' response puzzles them: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" they demand. This temple wasn't built in a day, after all. But St. John tells us the reason for their confusion: "But [Jesus] was speaking about the temple of His body." He was speaking about the temple of His body. Remember: What is the temple? The temple is where God dwells graciously with His people. Throughout the Old Testament, this meant a building of stone walls and a heavy curtain. But who is Jesus? He is the Son of God become flesh. Wherever Jesus is, there God is dwelling graciously with His people. Jesus is a walking temple: Where He is, God is, because He is God. And since that temple made of stone was meant to point to Him, Jesus now tries to direct the attention of those angry men from it to Him. It's not the dead stone that makes the temple. It's God's presence. Jesus is the temple-God dwelling among His people.

He is also the Sacrifice who will atone for their sin, because His enemies take Him up on His sign. They do destroy the temple: They nail His hands and feet to a cross and watch Him die. Here is the ultimate temple destruction: So much do they want God gone that they kill Him when they have the chance. But Jesus fulfills the rest of the sign. He rises again three days later. Note what happens at the temple made of stone at the moment Jesus dies: The curtain is torn in two, from top to bottom. Yes, this is in part a sign that there is no more need for sacrifices. But it is also the Lord's declaration that He isn't present in that temple anymore. The building will

be there for another forty years or so, but the Lord will be present elsewhere. Where? The Lord will be present wherever Jesus is, because Jesus is Lord.

Jesus is also the Word made flesh. Therefore, wherever the Word is proclaimed, Jesus-the Word-is present with His people. Add the Word to water, and Jesus is present with His people in Holy Baptism. And, of course, we dare not forget or ignore His great declaration of presence in His Supper: "Take and eat, this is My body. Take and drink, this is My blood...for the forgiveness of sins."

Jesus is present in His means of grace, His Word and Sacraments. Therefore, where you find His Word proclaimed in its truth and purity, and His Sacraments administered according to His Word, you will find Jesus. And wherever Jesus is, there is the temple.

What about today? Well, you can rejoice because the Temple draws near to you! Long ago, you had to journey to the temple in Jerusalem to be in the presence of the Lord, but no longer. The Lord comes to you! He is just as present in His means of grace here, today, as He was when He lived in the Holy of Holies, surrounded by a cloud of glory. That is why this room is called the sanctuary-the holy place, because God comes to you here. You also see a visual reminder of this during the Service of Holy Communion: The bread and wine are covered by a veil until the Supper -- and this veil reminds you of the curtain in the temple behind which the Lord lived. But at the time of the Lord's Supper, the veil is removed; and as you receive the Lord's body and blood in, with and under that bread and wine, you are in a most holy place. You are in the presence of God.

This is what worship is about. God is present here in His means of grace. You are in God's presence by being here, by receiving His means of grace. It's why we call worship "Divine Service:" The Divine is at your service, forgiving your sins. Now, here's the thing: If God graces us with His presence here — If He kindly visits us to forgive our sins, then it only makes sense that His grace and presence should always be the focus of our worship. Nothing in this service should distract us away from Him. This is why our worship always returns to His Word and Sacraments, for they are His temple. They are how He dwells among us.

Therefore, let the Church beware and be warned: It is possible to destroy the temple and leave the walls still standing. In the Old Testament, the Israelites mistook the walls of the temple to mean that God was still there. In our present day, many will point and say, "There is the Church;" but God may not be there at all. Some have completely forsaken the Lord's Word and Sacraments, but still consider themselves to be the Church. They will openly deny the authority of Scripture, the virgin birth of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead. Since they do not teach the Scriptures, their message is one of social activism, from protesting foreign policy to the protection of abortion rights or special rights for homosexuals.

Please be aware that such churches will be regarded as useful and praiseworthy by the world. But while they consider themselves to be the Church, we ask this question: Is Jesus present there, forgiving sins? No? It's not that He isn't faithful; it's that they have eliminated the means by which He is present, and do not want Him there. It might be called a church by some. But if Jesus Christ isn't there, there is no forgiveness or life to be found.

There is always the danger that a church will boast of its programs and activities over the means of grace: "Sure, we still believe that stuff, but the real ministry is going on in this or that group." In such a case, the focus shifts away from Jesus' presence to what we are doing instead. Now, I don't mean to say that we shouldn't care about or help serve the needs of others. We should. We must. But when a church with all sorts of programs and ministries is deemed much more alive than one where the people focus on gathering in the presence of the living Lord, then that focus is misplaced.

Above all, then, here is our program and ministry: That Jesus comes here to forgive sins. That He gathers us here, regardless of age, as a group called "His people." By His means of grace, He forgives the infant, the child, the youth, the young adult, singles and marrieds, the middle-aged and the elderly, without discrimination or separation. By His grace, we proclaim to you the forgiveness of sins, and by that Word you are forgiven; then you go forth to the vocations God has given you.

The 21st chapter of Revelation describes heaven, and guess what — there is no temple there— because there is no need for the Lord to hide His glory. Delivered from your sin and raised to everlasting life, you can gaze upon His glory and rejoice. Present with His people, God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away (Rev. 21:4). This is certain for you, dear people of God; because the Lord is present, here and now, to proclaim to you this joyous news: You are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.