

Temple Under Construction
Rev. Frank Allen
First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida

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John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

¹⁵ Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?"

¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?"

²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

SACRIFICIAL SCAM

In order to accommodate those who wished to make a sacrifice in the temple, the outer courts of the temple were filled with livestock and money changers. This was especially true during Passover when pilgrims from all over the ancient world made their way to Jerusalem.

They needed an animal without blemish to sacrifice as an atonement for their sin. And in order to pay their temple tax they needed to exchange their Roman money, which bore the image of Caesar and the idolatrous

phrase, "Caesar is Lord," for money that had no image. You can understand how it would have been an affront to pay the temple tax with money that contained such an image and phrase.

These services were necessary. At least that's what most people thought. But, over time this "service" had become big business. Those who sold animals did so at an outrageous profit. And the money changers also charged an exorbitant fee in order to exchange coins.

In fact one commentator suggested that it might cost pilgrims the equivalent of 3 or 4 thousand dollars to make the proper sacrifice and pay the temple tax. Given the fact that it was a requirement to attend at least one major religious festival per year, you can see what a hardship this could be on the people.

More than that, it was especially egregious that this economic gouging of the poor took place at Passover. The celebration of Passover was the celebration of God's people being liberated from slavery in the land of Egypt.

And according to Scripture the proper response to Passover was to use your freedom to liberate others. Since God's people knew what it meant to be strangers in a strange land they were not to oppress the alien, the poor, the orphan and the widow. The proper way to celebrate passover was to lift up those who were down and out.

But, what did the sacrificial system do?
It brought economic hardship to people who were already struggling.

No wonder this made Jesus angry. He formed a whip out of cords and drove the animals out. He poured out the coins and turned over the tables of the money changers.

These actions may have reminded the people of the prophet, Jeremiah. That prophet stood at the gates of the temple and said that what God required of his people was not worship in the temple but justice and mercy in their daily lives.

Ritual worship would not help them. Only a changed life would make them right before God and allow them to experience God's presence. (See Jeremiah 7:1-5)

In the same vein Hosea gave this word from the Lord, “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

Jesus stands in the tradition of these prophets when he condemns buying and selling in the outer temple courts. Echoing the words of the prophet Zechariah (14:20) Jesus says, “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

THE DAY OF THE LORD

Zechariah’s prophecy gives us a clue about the point Jesus is making. Zechariah wrote, “There shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts *on that day*.” In other words, Jesus’ actions indicate that the day of the Lord has come. The actions of Jesus on Passover is a sign that the kingdom of God has come to his people in a new way.

Notice also how Jesus changes the prophecy. He does not refer to the temple as “the house of the Lord” but as “my Father’s house.” Jesus was claiming the authority to cleanse the temple because he was the Son of God.

The disciples could see that Jesus meant business. They thought about the words of the Psalmist who wrote, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” (Psalm 69:9) Jesus was consumed. Jesus was eaten up by his passion for the holiness of his Father’s temple.

This was radical stuff. Later in John’s gospel Jesus will make an even greater claim. He will suggest that temples are not even necessary. In response to the Samaritan woman’s question about the proper place of worship, Jesus says that attempts to restrict worship to any physical site are misguided. It doesn’t make any difference where we worship.

Temples and their locations are not important.

The important point is how we worship. He told the woman at the well, “For God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:24)

Jesus is making a big claim. This is not just about the renewal of temple worship. This is about the arrival of God in the flesh. This is his Father's temple.

The Day of the Lord has come. In Jesus the Son of God has come, and for that reason, those who buy and sell in the temple courts have to go. And eventually the temple itself will have to go.

THE SIGN

In response to all this, the Jewish leaders ask for a sign.

They said in effect, "If you're God's Son and have come to change our cherished rituals, give us a sign. Do some miracle to show that you have the authority to act in this way. Prove that you are who you say you are."

That's when Jesus says something that is hard to understand. He tells the religious leaders, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up."

They thought this statement was ridiculous. After all the temple had been under construction for forty six years. And Jesus said that he was going to rebuild it in three days? The Jewish leaders had their answer. Jesus wasn't a prophet. He was crazy.

We might even agree with them except for the fact that John lets us (the readers of his gospel) in on a secret. Jesus wasn't talking about the temple at Jerusalem. Jesus was talking about the temple of his body.

God was in Christ. The Word had become flesh. And so if you're looking for the temple, if you're looking for that place where God resides, you need look no further than the man, Jesus.

And the proof of that will come later. That proof is the resurrection. The resurrection will be the final and decisive sign that the kingdom of God has come.

The religious and political leaders did indeed destroy the temple, the place where the Spirit of God resided. They destroyed Jesus. They crucified him.

But, on the third day he rose again.

The disciples didn't fully understand what Jesus was saying at the time. But, after the resurrection, they looked back on this confrontation and realized that it held a deeper meaning. In the death and resurrection of Jesus the temple was destroyed and rebuilt in a whole new way.

THE PROBLEM WITH TEMPLES

As I read today's lesson the thing that struck me was the importance and the amount of time devoted to building the temple in Jerusalem. It had been under construction for 46 years. (And I would learn from the commentaries that the temple would remain under construction for thirty six more years.)

Why was the temple always under construction? Why did it always have to be bigger and more elaborate?

And, for that matter why do we build elaborate cathedrals and churches? I think it's because we don't feel close to God and so we take on these elaborate building projects in the hope of filling that spiritual need.

Of course, the first example of these misguided building projects was the Tower of Babel. Do you remember the story? Human beings decided to build a tower that would reach to heaven. It didn't work out so well. God put an end to this misguided building project by confusing the languages of the people.

But, we've never quit trying to make it to God on our own. We still worship big buildings and big business instead of God.

Now I'll admit that having a place set aside for worship is helpful. And elaborate cathedrals can be impressive. Architecture can be used to give us a sense of the holy.

On the other hand we can become so obsessed with our building projects and our rituals that we actually distance ourselves from the God we seek to worship. That had happened in the temple.

Instead of the outer courts being a place of worship for the Gentiles the outer courts had become a livestock market and a money exchange. Instead of the temple being a place where people asked for God's forgiveness and sought his presence it had become big business.

Justice and mercy had been replaced with ritual sacrifice

THE BUSINESS OF RELIGION

That is often true in the church today. Many still use religion as a way to sell their stuff. You should see the junk mail that the church gets each week. There's always someone who wants to turn religion into a way to make a profit.

And sometimes what passes for "church" these days is nothing more than a religious reflection of our own wants and needs. This religion sells in the marketplace. But, does it get us closer to the one true God?

In the final analysis, we do not find God's presence in a building. And we certainly don't find God's presence by turning that building into a marketplace.

We find God's presence in Jesus Christ. If we want to get close to God we need to get close to Jesus. And how can we do that?

LISTEN TO THE WORD

In my sermon a few weeks ago we mentioned one way. We actually listen to Jesus.

On the Mount of Transfiguration the voice from heaven told the disciples, "This is my Son, the Beloved in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!" If we want to get close to God we need to listen the voice of Jesus as we find it in Scripture.

In verse 22 of our lesson for today we read that after the resurrection the disciples remembered what Jesus said, believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

The disciples treated the words of Scripture and the words of Jesus very seriously. And so should we. Faith begins when we remember. Faith begins when we listen carefully to the words of Jesus as we find them in Scripture.

This week I shared with my Bible studies the three questions that we ask when we do inductive Bible study. The three questions are:

1. What does the Scripture say?
2. What does the Scripture mean?
3. What does the Scripture mean to me?

I have found that quite often we don't spend enough time on question one. We don't spend enough time meditating on what the Scriptures actually say.

Religious professionals are often the worst when it comes to not listening to the words of Scripture and the words of Jesus. We move too quickly to the questions of what does it mean and what does it mean to me. And in so doing we often do not hear what God in Christ has to say.

My advice to those who teach Sunday School and those who preach sermons is this: Don't read the commentaries or the Sunday School lesson helps too soon. Read the Scripture and let it speak to you directly.

This takes great discipline. Our temptation is to immediately make some application to our life or ask questions about things in the text that trouble us.

Resist that temptation. Listen to Jesus. Listen to Scripture.

Many of Jesus' harshest critics were religious leaders. They knew the Scriptures, but their view of the Scriptures was distorted by the lens of their religious tradition. As Jesus once put it, they often replaced the clear words of Scripture with the teachings of tradition.

Today's lesson is a good example. The Jewish leaders had developed an elaborate system of ritualistic animal sacrifice based upon their tradition. But, according to Jesus that system did not bring them closer to God. It did just the opposite. They created a sacrificial system that was not just.

We've talked many times about how down through history the church has ignored the words of Scripture and the words of Jesus in favor of tradition. And often the results have been tragic. Instead of following the words of Jesus on more than one occasion, the institutional church has actually worked against the call of Christ.

WE ARE GOD'S TEMPLE

On the other hand we also learn from the history of the church that God can use weak, foolish human beings (like you and me) to bring the Spirit of Christ to others.

Paul once told one of his sorriest congregations, "You are God's temple and God's Spirit dwells in you." (1 Corinthians 3:16) In Matthew's gospel we learn that Christ, the light of the world commissions us to be his little lights in the world. (See Matthew 5:14)

To say it another way, the words of Christ are fleshed out in our lives.

In the end, although it's very important, it's not enough to just ask, "What does the Scripture say?" We must also eventually ask, "What does the Scripture mean and what does it mean to me?"

Jesus was the temple, the place where the presence, the Spirit of God resided. In Jesus "the Word became flesh and lived among us." But, where is the temple today? Where can we find the presence of God now that Jesus has ascended into heaven?

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthians answers that question this way,

"We are the body of Christ and each one of us is a part of it."

We find the presence of God in the lives of people who on this side of the resurrection have remembered the words of Scripture and the words of Jesus. (2:22) And the Word has taken root in these people. Christ lives in them and through them.

These people are the beginning of a new creation. They are God's temple and God's Spirit resides in them.

THE CHURCH IS A PEOPLE

In my children's sermon this morning we said (will say), "This is the church. This is the steeple. Open the door and look at the people." That little children's rhyme can teach an adult lesson. The church is more than a building or a steeple. The church is a people.

The Greek word for church used in the New Testament is *ekklasia*. It means literally "those who are called out from their homes to a public place."

We have been called by God to bring his Word to the public square. We have been chosen by God for a purpose. We have been called to convey the love and mercy of God to the world.

We are the body of Christ.
We are God's temple. God's Spirit dwells in us.

We cannot limit our faith to that one hour a week when we meet in the church. God's Spirit is not limited to the confines of this building.

The church is not a building. The church is a people, people who have been chosen to convey the presence of God's grace to the world in human form.

But, of course you may have noticed that we don't seem up to the high calling that we have been given.

What Paul also said to the church at Corinth could also be said of us.

We're not exactly the cream of the crop.
It seems foolish to call people like us to bear witness to the gospel. We're a ragtag bunch at best.

How can people like us be the body of Christ?
How can the Spirit of God be in people like us?
I must admit that this might be the hardest thing to believe.

I believe in God's grace.
I believe that God was in Christ.

But, can God be in us?

The Bible says “yes” over and over again.
 All I can say is that it’s a miracle.
 It is the greatest miracle of all.
 It is the miracle of faith.

God chooses to work through weak and foolish people like us. And at the end of the day God’s will is done.

TEMPLE UNDER CONSTRUCTION

In Jesus’ day the temple was always under construction. And maybe there is something right about that.

No, I’m not talking about building elaborate cathedrals. I’m talking about us. If we are the body of Christ, if we are the temple of God’s Spirit, then it’s necessary that we be a temple under construction.

The Bible says as much. We are always being conformed to the image of Christ. We are always being transformed by the renewing of our minds as we remember and study the words of Jesus.

Just as Jesus cleansed the temple, Jesus is in the process of cleansing us. God in Christ is in the process of changing us for the better.

In the Presbyterian Church (and in other Reformed Churches) we have a motto: “The Church reformed always to be reformed according to the Word of God.”

Notice that the verb is in the passive voice. The church is not doing the re-forming. The church is not in charge of this process.

The church is being acted upon by God in Christ. It is God who judges, re-forms and cleanses the church.

The cleansing of the temple continues even today.

And it’s a process that won’t be complete until the Day of the Lord comes in power and glory.

But, until that Day even an imperfect church can be used by God to convey His presence and give hope to the world.

We are the body of Christ. We are his holy temple. In him we worship in Spirit and in Truth.

Amen.