

Psalm 19
John 2: 13-22

“Temple Talk”

R.P.C.
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What is the primary reason for our gathering here this morning? I feel sure that there are some here who are hoping to find out more about the Christian faith. Perhaps you are a ‘seeker’ - a searcher after God and you may have come here to continue your search. Others of you may be going through a trying time in your life and you are here seeking comfort and consolation to help you make it through a difficult time. Or, maybe you are one of those persons who simply want to join in warm fellowship and be with good friends.

All of those reasons are good enough reasons to be here. But my initial question was, ‘what is the primary reason for our being here? We are all here, in one way or another, to worship God. Worship is the one thing that the church uniquely does that is not done at any other time or any other place, or by any other major body in the world.

And yet, how do we worship God? . . . If we remember anything about human history, you will have to admit the sad story of the all the ways we have forsaken God and rebelled against God. There have also been all those rationalized, psychological means by which we have bolstered ourselves against the judgments of God. So we have to admit that for people like us to worship and to make contact with the holy and living God, is no easy task.

Admittedly, sometimes we gather to worship God and we end up simply worshipping an idealized image of ourselves. At other times we come to worship and say we are listening for the word of God. But have you noticed how we tend to hear what we want to hear? We tend to come to worship “to get what we can out of it,” instead of giving something of ourselves to the worship and presence of God. Therefore the worship of God is no easily-accomplished task. I mean, how can sinful, finite creatures such as we are, hope to appropriately ‘rise up’ to meet a good, Holy and loving God?

One answer our dilemma is to build temples. After all, what is a temple but a place where we human beings can attempt to make contact with God? Our beloved sanctuary is a temple of sorts. This is a holy place – a place “set apart” - where we hope to shed ourselves of all the usual distractions and divergence that keep us from focusing on God.

The setting of this beautiful sanctuary is the way we hope to find a path toward God. Hence the architecture above us is symbolic of a seashell, an instrument

used in baptisms in the early church. Furthermore, the stained glass windows and the numerous hues of blues in this space are to remind us of the cleansing power of water. After all water is an element through which we experience the power, presence and providence of God: from creation with the spirit of God moving over the face of the waters, to the baby Moses found floating in the Nile, to the parting of the Red Sea; to Jesus being baptized in the Jordan River.

Thus we take note of Jesus and his actions in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus enters the beloved temple of Jerusalem, the very heart of Israel's faith, and what does he do? He drives the merchants from the temple's outer courts. His actions are offensive to those who observe him; after all these merchants were merely selling the necessary items and means for worshipping God in the temple. They were selling the sacrificial animals that are to be offered up to God.

But Jesus charges that they have badly perverted the temple, turning God's house into a place of business. Lest we be tempted to place ourselves in moral superiority to these people at the temple, let us confess all the ways that we are in danger of perverting our worship of God with our own interests. Let's confess to all the ways we have of tuning God into just another commodity that we all sell for bargain prices.

Jesus tells his Jewish critics that if this temple is destroyed, he can build it back in three days. Most of them who hear these words scoff at the idea, for this temple took over five decades to build, and had only recently been completed by the efforts of King Herod, who considered the temple to be a tribute to his greatness.

But John tells us that Jesus was talking about his death and his resurrection. Do we get what John is conveying to us here? Jesus is saying that HE is the new temple – the new means by which humanity will make contact with God. The temple at Jerusalem would tragically be destroyed by the Romans just a few years after Jesus spoke these words – destroyed because of a Jewish insurrection against Rome. So if the magnificent temple at Jerusalem was destroyed, what hope do the people now have of making contact with God?

Christians came to believe that God gave God's only Son to be our primary way by which we could get to God, and God can get to us. This is the message which appears throughout the rest of the Gospel of John. In and through Jesus the reign of God broke through to the world. He doesn't only make the reality of God's reign visible; he also makes it possible. He not only healed people as a sign of the **future kingdom's coming: he also invited sinners and outcasts to join that**

kingdom now! He rendered God's coming kingdom not as some fuzzy future possibility, but as a celebration in the present

To participate in the kingdom was to be in the company of Jesus and to trust what Jesus said about God and us was true: to live lives that showed that THIS God – rather than any of the then-popular gods of that day, like Dionysius, or Mars, or Venus, or even Caesar – that THIS God was the ONLY God, and THIS God was in charge.

When those first Christians believed in Jesus, they did not simply believe that he had some good religious ideas. They believed that by his action and his invitation, Jesus had made a decisive difference in human history. God is doing what Jesus does. Thus, God was not only revealing, but is acting. So it is that Stephen, the first Christian martyr, without hesitation, prays to Jesus when he dies, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59).

Those fervent Jewish monotheists who had awakened each morning and prayed the beautiful Shema, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one. . ." now, as Christians, routinely prayed to Jesus as the same, one God. They now gave answer to those who had asked, "Who is it that the winds and waves obey him?" or "Who is this who presumes to forgive sins?" And the answer they gave was Jesus. Who is this? None other than the One and only God of Israel. But now the God of Israel is "with us" – God in human form, doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

If we simplistically say that Christ is "only human" then he has no more to tell us about God than the average well-meaning, inspired spiritual teacher. On the other hand, if Christ is 'only God,' then he has little relevance to this frail, fragile, finite thing called human life. Once God Almighty so unreservedly joined humanity in Jesus Christ we were forced into complex and compound thinking: We affirm that Jesus is both human and divine. It's a concept that our finite minds cannot quite grasp.

Yet if we try to evade or avoid the deity of Christ by making Jesus just another victim of human injustice nailed to a cross, then it leaves God in heaven as a distant deity who is unable to experience what it means to be truly human. Worship of God then, becomes difficult because God is too far away. Furthermore, any belief that God is somehow concerned with our lives becomes virtually impossible. It is one thing to believe that humanity is created in the image of God. It is much more a blessed thing to believe that in spite of all our sin, God does what is necessary to preserve and maintain the divine-human bond.

When Jesus speaks of himself as the temple that is being destroyed and will be rebuilt in three days, I think that he is asserting a truth that we have experienced here in our worship. It is something we feel – something we can sense in this humanly constructed temple that is our sanctuary. This place feels “set apart.” And here, we do experience those moments when we sense Jesus’ presence: It comes with that blessing caused by a stirring hymn or anthem; we feel it as a scriptural text provides us with a wonder-filled “ah ha” moment; we sense it when we receive the warm handshakes, hugs, and care of fellow believers. It is in such moments, which occur in this sanctuary that the presence of Jesus Christ becomes that Spirit who links the human with the divine, and he becomes our temple.

To one of his sorriest congregations, the Christians at Corinth, Paul exclaimed, “You are God’s temple and God’s Spirit dwells in you” (I Cor 3:16). That statement is just what one might expect from a person who has been met by the living Christ, as Paul was on the road to Damascus. Christ, the light of the world, commissions us otherwise ‘benighted’ ones to be lights to the world as well (Matthew 5:14). In so doing, Christ implies that, if others are to see the light, it will be through us; and if we are to see God, we must see God through Christ. And here is a daunting truth: if the world is to know Christ, the world must learn of Christ through witnesses like us.

While we cannot ascend to God through our human thoughts and experiences, it is true that God can DESCEND to us – and has. When that happens, we indeed experience the truth of incarnation. We bump up against a God who is not merely the projection of our spiritual yearnings. Though the experience of millions of believers before us confirms the Gospel’s testimony of “God with us,” the Gospels are more than simply testimony to inner human experience. In and through the rhythm of the church’s worship we experience God coming to us today – to we who could not and cannot come to God.

The pattern of prayer and praise that we follow on Sunday morning is a very human activity that takes place in earthly time and space. We wash with water in baptism; we ingest wine and bread during the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. And in so doing we become vulnerable to the incursions of a God we did not concoct for ourselves. We dare to believe that God uses these thoroughly human activities – washing, eating and drinking to come very close to us in all of God’s holy otherness.

Thus, we experience – maybe not every Sunday but often enough to keep us in worship – the presence of God moving among us in our earthly worship. There we

are, just going through the rituals here at our “temple,” only to be surprised by the undeniable feeling of the presence of Christ, the true temple. Then we find ourselves thinking or exclaiming with Jacob, “Surely the Lord was in this place and I did not know it” (Genesis 28:16).

Standing at the baptismal font, we often offer a dear child to be baptized. Yet if we glance around, we will also see gathered, all the desperate, degenerate and wayward people like us. We are the ones who dare to pledge that we will pray for and nurture that child in the faith. And we can make that pledge because the Lord has gone out and recruited even the like of us for the kingdom of God.

As we take the bread and share the cup, meeting Jesus in those elements, when he looks at us across that table, he still too often sees Judas. Yet God comes to us through His son to offer us the gift of salvation. Jesus Christ, in his life, death and resurrection, is our primary – indeed our only- mediator between us and God.

We could not come to God, so God came to us, and comes to us still. God has taken the initiative – the first step to us in and through Christ. The Christian faith is the bold belief in God’s thorough-going, costly engagement with the stuff of everyday life; and of God’s engagement with us the everyday people.

God’s initiative is good news – great news - for our contemporary “age of spirituality” as some have named it; this time when so many around us say, “I’m not religious, but I’m very spiritual” – (which translated means: I’ve cranked down my faith to a vague inner, ethereal feeling I keep mostly to myself, so I don’t bother to attend worship.)

So the time has never been better than now for the Church to reclaim that it is the bodily form that the risen Christ takes in our world. What better time than now than to remind ourselves, as well as others that corporate worship is one means whereby God meets us still. What better time than now to think about Jesus Christ as the bodily bridge that God builds to connect us right back to God. What better time than now to affirm, that if we want to get to God, we must go through Christ; to gather to worship him – our risen temple. Amen.