

"A New Temple" John 2:18-22

March 11, 2012

3rd Sunday In Lent

One of the saddest pictures I saw among the many pictures of death and destruction wrought by the recent tornados in the Midwest and South was a picture of what was left of St. Joseph Catholic Church in Ridgway, Illinois. The church building was totally destroyed with just the front door left standing. Imagine how devastated the parishioners must have felt when they arrived upon the scene and saw the destruction. Imagine how you would feel if our church building was destroyed like that. It would be very difficult. We become attached to our building, both emotionally and theologically.

This was true of the Jews in both the Old and New Testaments. For them, the temple did not merely represent the presence of God; it contained the presence of God. This was not superstition or some pious tradition. God had said as much. When King Solomon built a rather modest temple (90' long x 30' wide x 60' tall), "The LORD said to him: "I have heard the prayer and plea you have made before me; I have consecrated this temple, which you have built, by putting my Name there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.'" (1 Kings 9:3) Many years later, when King Herod built a temple that covered 20 football fields, they felt the same way: the presence of God was in this place.

Theologically, there was nothing wrong with this. But the emotional attachment the Jews had for the temple steered them wrong. They began to place more confidence in the structure of the temple than in who occupied the temple. They viewed the temple almost like a good luck charm. They felt invulnerable as a nation because they had the temple. Since God occupied the temple, nothing could ever hurt them. When Solomon's temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. and when Herod's temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Romans, the people were absolutely devastated. "How could this have happened?", they must have asked themselves. They were at a total loss, emotionally and theologically, because the structure was gone.

We, too, can easily become attached to our building as a structure or our congregation as an organization. We call this "God's House". Keeping and maintaining it become the focus of our efforts

and attention. We feel safe as long as we have this building. We worry about the possibility of not having this building, due to lack of funds or some other disaster. People take confidence because their name is listed on the membership list of the congregation. Even though they live hundreds or thousands of miles away, members who have moved away still want to be members of Peace Lutheran Church because it gives them some sort of comfort and would feel hurt if their names were ever removed from the membership list. If our building was ever destroyed like the temple of the Jews or the church of St. Joseph, we would likely be devastated, but need we be?

Jesus talked about destroying the temple in our text for today. Jesus had become angry at the sight of people selling sacrificial animals and changing money within the temple confines. He drove the sellers and their animals out of the temple and flipped over the tables of the money changers. He said, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade."

Naturally, people noticed. The Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" Notice that they don't necessarily disagree with Jesus' actions. Others were bothered by the practice and nobody liked the fact that the high priest was getting a cut of the profits which may have been dishonestly obtained. The people who talked to Jesus just wanted to know if he had the authority to cleanse the temple since that was expected of the Messiah. They want a sign to prove his authority.

Jesus answered by saying, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." His listeners, who were so attached to the structure of the physical temple, immediately understood Jesus to mean that he will destroy the buildings and rebuild them in 3 days. They mocked him because this building project had begun 46 years ago in 20 B.C. and would not be finally completed for another 36 years in 64 A.D. How could Jesus possibly rebuild it in only 3 days?

Needless to say, they missed Jesus' point entirely. Jesus was making some staggering claims here, but they had nothing to do with the buildings surrounding them. By speaking of "my Father's house", Jesus was placing Himself in a special relationship with the Father whom the Jews always referred to as OUR Father.

Jesus also makes a subtle change in terminology which the English does not reflect. When Jesus came into the “temple”, the word used there referred to the entire group of buildings and territory which made up the huge temple complex. However, when Jesus says, “Destroy this “temple”, he uses a word that “denotes the shrine, the sanctuary, the very dwelling place of deity.” (Morris, p.199) As the text says, “he was speaking about the temple of his body.”

Hear what Jesus is saying. He is claiming, not just to be in a special relationship with God, but to be God Himself. He is saying that God would no longer reside in a building, but, from now on in His body. This is what John had said earlier in His Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:1,14) It is what St. Paul would say later on in his letter to the Colossians: “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” (Col. 2:9)

But the sign to be given to the Jews to show Jesus’ authority to cleanse His Father’s house would not come through these words, but, ironically from the Jews themselves. By crucifying Jesus on the cross, the Jews would become the means of bringing about the sign which they asked Jesus to produce. By His death and, more importantly, by His rising from death to life in three days, Jesus would show Himself to be the Son of God with the authority to do what He had done.

Even more ironic was that, by putting Jesus to death, the Jews would offer the one sacrifice that could truly take away all sins of all people for all time, thus rendering the temple and the sacrifices therein as unnecessary any more. All sin would be paid for; all sin would be forgiven; all sin would be taken away when the Jews would destroy the “temple” of Jesus’ body.

What does all of this mean for you and me? It means the same as it did for the people of Jesus’ time. We are not bound to a building. Neither does God bind Himself to any one building as He did before with the Jews. God is to be found and present in the body of Christ. Where the body of Christ is, there is forgiveness, life, and salvation.

When you are baptized, you are baptized into Christ and are joined to His body. You receive the washing away of all of your sins through the baptismal waters. When you hear the Word of God read and preached and when you hear the word of absolution proclaimed, you are hearing Christ. You don't merely learn about forgiveness, life, and salvation through the Word of God. You actually receive those blessings because the Word of God produces that which it promises. When you attend Holy Communion, you consume the body of Christ, as well as His blood. Your "common union" with the body of Christ is reinforced and strengthened. You are "in Christ" in a very unique and special way. God is truly and really present with you and in you in the washing, the hearing, and the eating and drinking.

Does all of this mean that a building like ours is unnecessary or that it is wrong to have and maintain such a building? Not at all. Jesus was not condemning the temple in our text. Neither did Jesus condemn nice, even extravagant, signs of devotion to Him. You will remember when Mary (of Mary and Martha fame) used some very expensive perfume to anoint Jesus' feet, Jesus refused to go along with Judas' complaint that the perfume be sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus accepted the extravagant and costly gift given for his use and said that they would always have the poor with them.

What it does mean is that the building and even congregational membership should never be our main focus. God is not here because of the building. Nor is God present with you because your name is on the church membership list. God is present in a saving way only in the body of Christ. This building gives a place and an opportunity for those who are in Christ to meet. Christ is present here, not because of the building, but in the waters of Holy Baptism, the reading, preaching, and declaring of His Holy Word, and in the Holy Communion. You are in Christ, not because your name is on a congregation's membership list, but only as you are baptized, receive the Word of God, and eat and drink in Holy Communion.

I love this building and this congregation and I hope you do, too. God has truly blessed us through these material blessings. Let's take good care of this place. But let us not become so

emotionally attached to these physical things that we miss God entirely. He is here, present in the body of Christ through His Word and Sacraments. As the Scriptures say, "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." Rejoice, therefore, not in a church built of wood and stone or even in a congregation named Peace Lutheran Church, but in our new temple, Jesus Christ, who brings the presence of God to us and us to the presence of God. Amen.