

Lent 4, 2024

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2 Chronicles 36:14–23, Psalm 122, Ephesians 2:4-10, John 6:1–15

During Lent, our readings have invited us to an extended reflection on the Temple. We started with a reflection on Noah and the Ark. The ark is a portable Tabernacle through the waters of the flood. Throughout history the church has been called “The ark of salvation.” Last week, Fr. Les invited us to consider the cleansing of the Temple. The moneychangers expanded into the court of the Gentiles, and as Fr. Les said, “There was no room for the alien, the stranger, the sojourner, to come as close as they could, to the action.” This week we are reminded of the destruction of the Temple at the end of the Kingdom of Israel.

It might help to pause and consider some aspects of the Temple throughout Scripture. First, we might remember that the Temple is the dwelling place of God with man. The earliest image is in the Garden of Eden. Genesis 2 tells the story of God planting a garden in the East. He put man in the garden and “and out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.”¹ Food and communion with God and humans are linked all through Scripture. Genesis 2:10 reads, “A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers.”² This tells us that the Garden of Eden is actually below the land of Eden. The river runs down to water the garden. From the garden the river splits into four rivers and flow down to four different lands. Now we know, the Eden is at the top of a mountain. A river flows east to the garden. The Garden of Eden is also above the earth on a mountain.

Adam and Eve dwell in unbroken communion with God. We see God creating and instructing Adam, creating Eve, and leading them into communion with one another and with God. Thus, the Garden of Eden is a place where heaven and earth are united in a communion of love. This harmony is broken when Adam and Eve turned from the Creator and toward the creature. Adam and Eve must leave this place and go down the mountain to the plains below.

This is important to know because the various Tabernacles and Temples will recreate something like the Garden of Eden, where heaven and earth meet. The Temple is built on a mountain, Mt. Zion. If we read the descriptions of the elements in the Tabernacle and Temple, it is in some sense a recreation of the Garden of Eden.

This kind of imagery appears in various forms throughout Scripture. Moses goes up on Mt. Sinai to meet with the Lord. Here’s another interesting detail: food and drink are involved in the worship of the Lord. Moses ascends with the 70 elders up the mountain. In Exodus 24, we read,

⁹ Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, ¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone,

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ge 2:9.

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ge 2:10.

like the very heaven for clearness. ¹¹ And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God and ate and drank. ³

This pattern of eating and drinking as a part of worship is consistent with the sacrifices of the people, the festivals of Israel, and even at the Resurrection of Jesus. In Acts 10 we read,

They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.⁴

The Tabernacle and later the Temple become the central symbol of Israel's relationship to God. They are the connecting point between heaven and earth. In our reading from 2 Chronicles today, we hear about judgment on the people and the destruction of the Temple. For the Jew, this represented the end of the heaven and earth. It is unthinkable. Utter abandonment by God. In Babylon, Daniel continues to face Jerusalem and pray three times a day. The Temple is gone, but he still faces where the Temple was.

Then a strange and unexpected event. Ezekiel sees a wheel within a wheel come to Babylon. He sees the glory of God come to the place of the captives. The Jews are under judgement, but God does not abandon them. Eventually Ezekiel sees God's breath resurrect the nation that is dead and restore it.

In the Gospels, we see Jesus eating and drinking with the people. Turning water to wine at the wedding feast, and even eating with Zacchaeus. In this sacred fellowship, Zacchaeus is transformed. In today's Gospel, Jesus transforms a limited amount of food into an abundant feast for over 5,000 people. This is an image of manna (bread of heaven) but it also makes us think of the festivals and the worship of God's people. Jesus is now the bread of heaven and wherever He goes, there is abundance. This all points to the true restoration of the Temple: the New Heavens and Earth.

This living Temple made up of God's people rooted and grounded in Christ appears all through Paul's writings. In our Ephesians reading, Paul is giving us a vision of the church as the Body of Christ and as the Temple of God. At the end of Ephesians 2, he describes this new Temple,

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.⁵

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ex 24:9–11.

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ac 10:39–41.

⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Eph 2:19–22.

This is not a static description of the church. It names who we are now, but simultaneously it points to who we as a people are becoming. This Temple of God will be fully revealed in the culmination of all things in Christ Jesus. We are the Temple and we are becoming the Temple. As Markus Barth once said, “Christ is christing us christward.” We are growing up into Him.

With this in mind, we consider our reading today.

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. ⁶

He made us alive together: Jew and Gentile have become one new man. We return to Ephesians 2:13-16,

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.⁷

He has made us both one: Jew and Gentile. He has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility. The Temple separated Jew and Gentile. As Fr. Les pointed out last week, the court of the Gentiles was being crowded out by the sale of sacrifices. Jesus has removed the dividing wall between the races. Not only that, in the cross He has removed the veil that separated us from God. We are free to approach and partake of His unspeakable love. He is praying that both Jew and Gentile will know the heights and depths and width and breadth of God’s love.

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ⁸

⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Eph 2:4–10.

⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Eph 2:13–16.

⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Eph 3:14–19.

This communion of love is so important to Paul that he addresses it in one way or another in almost every letter. In Galatians, he rebukes Peter and the Judaizers for refusing table fellowship with the uncircumcised Gentiles. Why? Eating together is a sign of the kingdom come: communion with God and man.

In Galatians 3:28, he writes, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁹

In 1 Corinthians, he rebukes the rich for excluding the poor in the love feasts.

²⁰ When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat. ²¹ For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. ²² What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.¹⁰

Whether we are feasting on the body and blood of the Lord or simply eating and drinking together, we are acting out the sacred communion of God and man in Christ Jesus. This is a cause for great joy and call to great hospitality. We are called to welcome the outsider, the marginalized, the poor and the rich, male, and female.

We practice this image of the Temple, of the union of heaven and earth in Christ every week in worship. We also take this hospitality out this us into the greater community as emissaries of Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is great river that Ezekiel saw flowing out from the Temple. We see this same river in the Revelation.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.¹¹

Lord have mercy on us and send us forth as your priests to a world in desperate need of healing grace.

⁹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ga 3:28.

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 11:19–22.

¹¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Re 22:1–2.