

March 7, 2021
John 2:13-22

Lent 3
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“An Altar in the World”

“Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place.”

The Roxborough neighbourhood of Philadelphia has always been a special place to me. During my second year of seminary, I served a congregation in Roxborough as a part of my field education work and learned a lot about preaching and leading worship on a weekly basis. Roxborough is where Susan lived while we were dating, and we became acquainted with many parts of the community throughout our courtship. And it was to Roxborough that I returned for the funeral of Dr. William B. Williamson, my professor and mentor in university. In addition to being a university professor, Dr. Williamson was an ordained Episcopal priest who served a congregation in that community. As soon as I received the news of his death, I knew that I had to attend his funeral to honour the man who played such a key role in my education and formation as a pastor. On that cold November day, I arrived in Roxborough about an hour before the service was to begin, so I had some time to drive around and see the places that I had known so well many years before that day. Susan’s apartment was still there, along with some of the stores and restaurants that we used to visit; but when I drove up to the building that had housed Grace Lutheran Church, I was surprised to see that it is now a medical office building. I did not know what happened to the congregation; perhaps it had merged with the local Lutheran congregation with which it shared a pastor for many years, or maybe it moved to another location, or it may have closed – as is the fate of many small urban churches. The building was still standing, but the purpose it had once served as a place where a congregation of God’s people had met for worship no longer existed.

Many communities are the locations of church buildings that have been “repurposed,” which once served as the gathering place for Christian congregations but now are used for other purposes. The popular Revival House restaurant in Stratford was once the home of a local church (it was once called The Church Restaurant). The Guthrie Center that is mentioned in Arlo Guthrie’s “Alice’s Restaurant” was once a church that became the home of the restaurant’s namesake and the site of that notorious Thanksgiving dinner. Some large church buildings have become community centres, performance spaces, and condominiums, as these spaces that once served the needs of the church are no longer useful for that purpose. While it is a sad occasion when a congregation leaves the place that had been its home for generations, there may

come a time when these buildings no longer serve the use for which they were originally intended.

The Jerusalem Temple was the central worship place for the Jewish people since it was established by King Solomon hundreds of years before the incident in today's Gospel lesson. It was the place where God was believed to dwell, the place where observant Jews would visit to worship, offer sacrifices, present their firstborn sons to the Lord (as Mary and Joseph present Jesus in Luke's Gospel); it was the place to which Jews throughout the world would return for pilgrimages on such festival occasions as Passover and Pentecost. While they would gather in local synagogues for worship and study of Scripture, there was only one Temple, and its role in the life of the people of Israel was central.

Jesus' visit to the Jerusalem Temple in John's Gospel is on the occasion of the Passover, the annual celebration of God's liberation of God's people from bondage in Egypt. It follows his first miracle at Cana, where at a marriage feast Jesus turns water into wine and thereby "*revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*" (2:11). He travels south with his disciples to Jerusalem, where "*in the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables*" (2:14). Such commerce was a regular scene on the Temple grounds and served a critical role in the Temple rites that took place on that holy site. The cattle, sheep, and doves were required for burnt offerings in the Temple ("*If the offering is a sacrifice of well-being, if you offer an animal of the herd, whether male or female, you shall offer one without blemish before the LORD.*" – Leviticus 3:1). Since Passover was a pilgrimage feast, many of those coming to worship in the Temple would have journeyed a great distance and would not have brought animals with them. They needed to buy animals in Jerusalem in order to participate in Temple worship. Similarly, the temple tax could not be paid in Greek or Roman coinage because of the human image (the emperor's head) on these coins, and inscriptions in which the emperor was worshiped as a god in violation of the commandment "*you shall have no other gods before me ... you shall not make for yourself an idol*" (Exodus 20:3-4). Pilgrims to the Temple would exchange their money for coins that would be acceptable to offer in this holy place. The sale of animals and the changing of money, therefore, were necessary if Temple worship were to proceed.

Jesus's reaction to this scene is sudden and violent: "*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.*" (2:15). He also cries out to those selling doves "*take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's*

house a market-place!” His sudden reaction shocks everyone, both his disciples and the people in the Temple; it brings to the disciples’ mind the words of Psalm 69: “*zeal for your house will consume me.*” (2:17; Psalm 69:9), which provides the lens through which John wants the reader to interpret Jesus’ actions in the Temple. While the episode is reported in all four Gospels, John moves it from Holy Week – toward the end of the Gospel story – to the beginning of his Gospel. (The response to his cleansing of the Temple in Mark is that the authorities “*kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching*” – Mark 11:18). Jesus refers to the Temple as an “emporium” or marketplace; rather than a place of spiritual preparation, Jesus instead sees the place focused on monetary exchange. Like Old Testament prophets, Jesus challenges the temple economy, questioning whether it was focused more on wealth than prayer. His disciples understand this as the motivation to his actions that will continue throughout John’s Gospel.

- “Rather than a maniac come to disrupt worship, Jesus’ disciples understand him to be like the righteous sufferer of Psalm 69: one whose ‘zeal’ for God’s house and statutes made him a target for his enemies ... Like Jesus, the psalmist has a different understanding of how one is to prepare for a holy day. Rituals and sacrifices should be done out of true devotion to the Lord: “*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings*” (Hosea 6:6).” – Alicia Myers.

The psalmist’s words that “*it is zeal for your house that has consumed me*” functions as a prophecy of the time when Jesus will be consumed – that is, his crucifixion. Jesus’ passion was read in the light of Psalm 69 by many New Testament writers, showing that the Temple story in John is ultimately about Jesus’ fate, not the Temple’s.

- “They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” – Psalm 69:21.
- “And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it.” – Mark 15:23.
- “After this, when Jesus knew that all was not finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), ‘I am thirsty.’ A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So, they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When he had received the wine, he said, ‘It is finished.’ Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” – John 19:28-30.

For John, “*Jesus is the righteous sufferer even when – or perhaps especially when – he does what looks outrageous.*” (Myers).

While the disciples are discerning the meaning of Jesus’ outburst, the others in the crowd are not so contemplative; instead, they demand that he tell them “*what sign can you show us for doing this?*” (2:18). Their demand for a sign is in reality a question about Jesus’ authority. In John’s Gospel, “sign” (*semeion*) is used in the sense of a revelatory act (“*Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee ...*” – 2:11); here it is used in the sense of a warrant, demanding that Jesus provide proof that he has authority to commit such an act (“*By what authority are you doing these things?*” – Mark 11:28). Jesus response is at first strange and mysterious; instead of offering the proof of authority that the leaders demand, Jesus answers with the statement “*destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*” (2:19). This statement is found elsewhere not on the lips of Jesus but in the testimony of false witnesses at Jesus’ trial (“*We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’*” – Mark 14:58) and from the crowds who taunt Jesus on the Cross (“*Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!’*” – Mark 15:29-30).

The leaders of the people respond to Jesus’ words about the Temple with disdain: “*This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?*” (2:20). The rebuilding of the Temple was begun @19 B.C.E. during the reign of Herod the Great; it was not uncommon for such construction project to last for several decades (some of the great cathedrals in Europe took hundreds of years to construct). But John shows how they misunderstand the meaning of Jesus’ statement; the very he uses to speak of the raising of the Temple (*egeiro*) points to a second, more symbolic meaning, because this verb is also used to speak of the resurrection (“*Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomsoever he wishes*” – 5:21). Since for Judaism the Temple is the locus of God’s presence on earth, John’s statement that “*he was speaking of the temple of his body*” (2:21) suggests that Jesus’ body is now the locus of God. “*Jesus has the authority to challenge the temple system because he is the locus of God’s presence on earth.*” (Gail O’Day).

- “According to John, Jesus’ body itself is the sanctuary of God’s presence, not the center of the temple which once held the ark of the covenant ... Jesus is not just any righteous sufferer; he is the location of God’s glory rather than the

temple building in which he stands. Jesus disruption of the worship practices, therefore, is God's own critique." – Myers.

John concludes his account of Jesus' actions in the Temple by stating that "*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.*" (2:22). In John, remembrance is active reflection on the past in light of the resurrection with the aid of the Holy Spirit. Such reflection leads to faith and deepened understanding ("*His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.*" – 12:16). Remembering the past with the aid of the Holy Spirit reveals the truth of Scripture and Jesus' word in new ways:

- "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith." – Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*.

The closing words of this episode in John's Gospel points to "*the interpretive activity of believers as they remember and claim the stories and saying so Jesus as their own. Jesus is the locus of God's presence on earth, and God as known in Jesus, not the Temple, should be the focal point of cultic activity.*" (O'Day).

Jesus' activity at the Temple is not merely a reaction to the abuses he witnesses on that holy site; it is a challenge to the temple system itself. As the Temple was the place where God's presence was believed to dwell among God's people, now God's presence among God's people was in the person of Jesus himself. It is Jesus who is "*the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth*" (1:14). It is in Jesus that "*all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross.*" (Colossians 1:19-20). The crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ is the one to whom "*every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*" (Philippians 2:10-11). The worship of the Lord is no longer centered in a specific physical location; those who confess that Jesus Christ is Lord know that worship is possible in any place, because the one who is Emmanuel – "God

with us” – calls upon his followers to “*remember, I am with you always, to the close of the age*” (Matthew 28:20).

- “For John, when people focus too much on a physical location, they miss out on God’s glory standing right in front of them. The Romans will destroy a physical building in 70 C.E., but it was their destruction of Jesus’ body, God’s true sanctuary, that was both tragic and the means of God’s greatest revelation ... Worshipping in Spirit and truth wherever we may be, we see God’s glory by remembering God’s love made manifest in Jesus – even when he disrupts our usual plans.” – Myers.

The building that once housed Grace Lutheran Church in Roxborough has been repurposed, but that does not mean that the mission of this congregation – and all congregations in that place – has been discontinued. Many church buildings will continue to be repurposed so that they may serve a variety of purposes – but the purpose for which these buildings were constructed will go on. The locus of God’s presence among us is not centered in one location; because God is present among us in our crucified and risen Lord and Saviour, we have the assurance that wherever we may be, however we may gather, our Lord Jesus Christ is present among us, and therefore any place can be a holy place when we are brought together in the presence of the Lord.

- “God can come to me by a still pool on the big island of Hawaii as well as at the altar of the Washington National Cathedral. The House of God stretches from one corner of the universe to the other. Sea monsters and ostriches live in it, along with people who pray in languages I do not speak, whose names I will never know.” – Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*.

While I was saddened to see that the building that was once the home of Grace Lutheran Church no longer serves that purpose, I was thankful on that day for what that building had meant to my seminary education. God was present with the people who worshiped and served in that place at that time, and God will be present no matter where God’s people may meet. Church buildings may be repurposed, but the purpose of those who dwell in the eternal presence of the Lord remains the same: to be the people of God who are made members of the church which is the body of Christ in Holy Baptism and called to proclaim the good news that our Lord and Saviour is with us wherever we may be, for nothing can separate us from the love of God that dwells among us in Jesus Christ our Lord – Emmanuel, God with us.

Amen.