

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.*

What is a 'temple', really? And why is Jesus so passionate about cleansing it? And why does he tease the people that day with the idea that he himself is the temple? What is that all about? How was that supposed to be helpful to them? How is it helpful to us?

After Moses received the Ten Commandments from God, he brought them to the people on stone tablets, they say. And he proclaimed them to the people aloud, like Gloria did for us today. It is said that they took these tablets upon which God's most primal teachings were inscribed, and placed them in a large wooden chest, called an 'Ark', along with some other important mementoes (Aaron's budding rod, a piece of 'manna'), and carried it with them wherever they went. Think of it as a bride's 'hope-chest'. Scripture tells us that they would carry this container about a half-mile in front of them as they traveled into the promised land, as they went into battle, as they searched for a new home, and it always brought them good fortune. Having it with them, they always felt that God was with them, that God's presence was real, and nearby. And for them it was an image of them choosing to be with God, too. Therefore it became known as the Ark of the Covenant.

In my sermons these past two weeks, I have spoken about the concept of 'covenant', and have hoped to make the case that covenant is a central theme of Lent. Covenants are more than contracts. They are more like a marriage, I think. True, the parties of the first part and the parties of the second part make vows and promises to each other, but these promises are embraced less as obligations and more like opportunities. These vows are less for personal gain of each than they are for mutual affection between both. So the sun, says psalm 19, is as anxious as a bridegroom to leap out of its nightly chamber to cross the whole length of the heavens to declare and illuminate his joy. And do it day after day, not out of some legal obligation, but to share the great joy of God's love. To share the delight of covenant. I have also pointed out during these weeks of Lent that this special covenant which we enjoy with God *originated* with God. God invited Abraham into the covenant, and God invites us, too. This special relationship is all *God's* initiative. It is a loving gift to beloved creatures. A gift like the Ten Commandments, meant for our enjoyment and growth.

But what is a temple, really? How does it express the establishment of covenant? How does it become so important to the Hebrew people? Well, after many years of being transported around the Palestinian countryside, young king David brings the Ark of the Covenant to his new capital at Jerusalem. There was a grand procession with much pomp and circumstance and apparently some liturgically incorrect dancing, too! And there in the city it was placed under just a makeshift tarp, or tent, to protect it from the weather. But at least God's presence was thought to now be central to the seat of human power there in Jerusalem. David, after thinking about the new palace he had built for himself, and contrasting how *he* was living compared to the dwelling place of God, got the idea to build a magnificent structure to house the Ark. So he consulted with his spiritual director, the Prophet Nathan, and told him of his inspired plan. But Nathan, speaking for God, told him that God didn't want a fancy house, that God was most satisfied when near the people, near the beloved creatures, not locked away in some protective chamber. The covenantal relationship, which had been so dearly and difficultly achieved, should be literally visible to all. One day should be permitted to tell its tale of good news to the next without impediment. The heavens should be able to be heard when they declare the glory of God. So, David held off.

No, it was David's son, Solomon, who, full of the ambition and prosperity which passed for wisdom and vision in those days, built the first temple for God. As part of a great urban-renewal project, Solomon built a huge and impressive structure to house God's presence. It was a landmark. It was a sight-to-behold. It was the pride of Jerusalem. There, surrounded by impenetrable walls, God's Ark sat in residence, locked away in the 'Holy of Holies'. God's presence was protected not only from the weather, but also from the riff-raff, from exposure to the common people and their viral infections, from those who might dishonor God, the civil

champion and historic good-luck charm. And for a time God was in his temple and all was right with the world, until it wasn't. After a few generations God's hidden presence had become so dimmed and distorted in the land that even the Babylonians were not sufficiently impressed, and they invaded and conquered Jerusalem and utterly destroyed the magnificent temple. The prominent citizens, including the Levite priests who had been curators of the temple, were marched off to captivity and exile in Iraq. And there the people felt separated from God. Despite the preaching of prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel, many thought that the covenant, their cherished relationship with God, had evaporated along with their prosperity in those dark days. Others, curiously, perhaps listening to God's prophets, found new relationship with God possible even without the mementoes or the temple. They devotedly met together in small groups in homes and outdoor settings to pray and consider God's Holy Word. And they learned that they could be spiritually inspired virtually anywhere! But when they were released and returned to Jerusalem, what did their civic and religious leaders insist that they do? Well, build another temple, of course!

Not that a temple isn't useful, but what should a temple be, really? As we return to using our church structure today, do we feel as if we are returning from exile? And meanwhile, what have we learned? You may remember another story from the Gospel of John, when Jesus meets a woman by a well in Samaria. During their discussion, she reminds him that one of the prejudicial sticking-points between Judeans and Samaritans was the insistence that God's true presence (say the Judeans) can be found only in the Jerusalem Temple. The Samaritans, like those ancients who carried that cumbersome Ark around, were devotedly worshiping God wherever they happen to be, on hillsides and coastlands throughout their homeland. And then Jesus confided to this religiously incorrect woman that one day, one day soon, *all* will worship together in covenant through him, through the grace of God, through him, with him, in him, and with his blessing. Houses of worship will be useful, temples may be appreciated, but true worship will be in the heart. Covenant will be a gift of creation and found in every corner of creation, from the uttermost ends of the sky, and will be declared by the heavens themselves; even if they have no voice of their own, their declaration will be profound.

To Jesus, I think, the Temple is a metaphor. It is an image of the eternal Covenant. It is a reminder of our relationship with God, a relationship we share across all humanity. And in the over-turning of the tables, Jesus is demonstrating a true Lenten activity: the cleansing of that relationship. Cleansing it of hypocrisy, of greed, of selfishness, of foolishness, of all those things which threaten to separate us from our baptismal vows. Covenant is a holy relationship in which we are all meant to share and participate. Like a marriage. The hope-chest we carry is really in our hearts, full of the teachings and encouragement and mementoes with which God has blessed us. And even if that temple of relationship were to be destroyed by some army of evil intent, God's grace would rebuild it, restore it in as little as the days. Crucified, buried, and hidden away in a dark and moldy place, that relationship would be resurrected and reborn and reinvigorated by God's unswerving love, by God's extraordinary Christ. Just the same, we should be passionate about the 'cleansing', just as he was, and we should do it with vigor, as Lent teaches us.

Now, I'm not suggesting that you should go out and overturn the rummage sale tables, but as we return to our meeting hall after this year of precautions, I *am* asking you to think about what we have learned in exile: that, as useful as this place is, and as precious and full of mementoes as it is, it doesn't contain all of God's presence. While it is certainly a 'house of God', it isn't the only *home* of God. I know that for many of us this space is a 'thin-place', where we experience God's presence in a special way, but I maintain that we feel that way because of how we find God's presence in each other when we are gathered here. The temple of our relationship with God is often found here because of our relationship with each other. But our vow is to take that relationship from this place out into the world, spreading the good news of God's love and teachings and blessed gifts. That is a Lenten discipline for us, one we ought to do deliberately and joyfully. Amen.