

Jan. 19, 2013 - Cleansing the Temple

John 2:13-25 - *Jesus cleanses the temple, signifying the destruction and raising of the temple of his body.*

“Where Does God Meet Us?”

The readings between now and Easter are all from John’s Gospel. Which is great because there are some wonderful stories—mini-dramas really—that are fun to tell. And John’s Gospel has in it some of the simplest, clearest, and most hopeful things in the entire New Testament. For example, if I say “John 3:16” almost everybody knows pretty much what it says without even having to think about it. But it’s also true that right next to those safe, secure wading pools of comfort are some deep, unfathomable whirlpools of symbols, hidden meanings, and ideas drawn from Greek philosophy. This can make reading John’s Gospel a roller coaster kind of experience and preaching from it kinda tough. The way I’m going to deal with that is to focus on one thing and just hint at a couple of others and let you meditate on them at your leisure.

So, here we go. Where does God live? You may have had a child ask you that question. You may have asked it yourself. When the newly freed Hebrew slaves were just starting out, God’s presence was seen in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. To them maybe God lived in the sky. Then they came to Mt. Sinai. And when Moses went up the mountain into the clouds and the smoke and the thunder it sure looked like God live there. Those locations were pretty remote. God was around but not too close. And then they built a tabernacle, a tent which they carried around with them. This tabernacle was a symbol of God’s presence among them. It was a bit closer to home, but you could still avoid it.

And then when David had consolidate all the tribes into one kingdom and had taken Jerusalem and made it his capital and had built a house for himself, he turned his attention toward building a house for God. But the prophet Nathan told him No, perhaps because there was too much blood on David’s hands. David’s son Salomon built the Temple with its Holy of Holies which only the high priest entered only one time each year. Surely it seemed God lived there. The Old Testament describes the Temple as the place where heaven and earth meet and speaks of the Temple as the place where God lives. Some of the Old Testament writers are a bit uncomfortable with that, and they speak of the Temple as the place where God’s name dwells.

I wonder if the average Joe (or in this case, the average *Joseph*) felt God’s presence when he or she was away—maybe even a hundred miles away—from the Temple in Jerusalem, a city to which the demands of life permitted them to return only once in awhile? Because the real question is not where does God live but Where Does God Meet Us? The Gospel of John just assumes that people will want to have a relationship with God, will want to meet God. Even in our increasingly irreligious age, I think that’s still true. People want to meet God. People want to have a relationship with God. It’s not unheard of to hear someone say, I like Jesus; it’s the Church I can’t stand.”

In today’s story Jesus and his followers are headed to the Temple. Jesus, too, speaks of the Temple as the place where God lives. He calls it “my Father’s house.” And before we judge those

who have gone before us as being naïve about God living in a building, let's look at our own language and behavior. If someone were to ask you or me, "Where's your church?" it's pretty likely that we'd say "830 Romancoke Rd." or "just past the American Legion" or something like it. Of course that would be wrong. Our church, anybody's church, is not a building; it's the people who assemble for worship. At the moment our church is mostly at 830 Romancoke Rd. Tomorrow at this time our church will be scattered across Maryland.

We should know that—but our language betrays us and leads us into wrong ways of thinking and acting. I have encountered a couple people during my lifetime who have explicitly said that their job as a church was to maintain and preserve the building. Well, that may be a good and necessary thing to do. But once we have done that we have not even begun our work as a church. Not having a building to worry about presents us with an opportunity. We should seize that opportunity.

Don't get me wrong: you can meet God here. God does live here, but not *only* here. This is God's house in a special way because this is one of those rare places where public worship takes place, the Word is preached, and the Sacraments administered. But your house is God's house, too. Your school, your place of work is God's house, too, even if those who are running the joint won't acknowledge it. You can meet God there, too.

On Christmas Eve we hear stories of Immanuel, God with us. In the first chapter of John's Gospel we hear how the Word that was in the beginning has been made flesh and has dwelt among us. Both are saying pretty strongly that we don't need to be running off to some mountain or tent or special building to find God's presence among us. Both are saying that God is with us in a real flesh and blood way in the person of Jesus. And both are saying that we don't leave God behind when we leave the special building and can't avoid God simply by avoiding the building or the assembly. This is both good and uncomfortable news.

In today's Scripture we hear Jesus speaking of a whole new, different kind of Temple: himself. He is claiming that since he and Father are one, we meet God in him. Of course, nobody, not even his followers understood what he was talking about. Only after Easter, only after the resurrection did his disciples put two and two together and understand that when Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," he was talking about the temple of his body, and that Jesus was saying that God dwelt in him. Where is the best place to meet God? In the person of the risen Lord Jesus.

And in you? Didn't see that one coming, did you? I know I didn't. One of the great things about writing sermons is how often the Scriptures hit me over the head with something I should have known but didn't. What do you think? Do you meet God in yourself? Let me ask it this way: Does the Holy Spirit dwell within you? We say that the Spirit is given to us in baptism. Are you conscious of God's Spirit within you? And are you inviting Jesus in? Do you want an encounter with the risen Christ? I hope you do, but I can understand why you might be a little reluctant. I mean, think about what Jesus did when he entered the Temple. He caused a ruckus and threw out a lot of things he didn't think belonged there. What might Jesus drive out of you and me if we let him in?

The sermon challenge I want to leave us with this week is a simple one. Simple, but it's not easy. When you rise, when you eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and when you go to bed, say, "I am a baptized child of God; God's Holy Spirit lives in me. Today I invite Jesus into my life." Say it out loud. If others are around, you might want to say it a rather softly. But words have power, so speak the words: "I am a baptized child of God; God's Holy Spirit lives in me. Today I invite Jesus into my life." *Repeat 3 times.*