

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Sermon: "Where do we meet God now?"

Scripture: John 2:13-25

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Have you ever gone on a pilgrimage?

Maybe you've been to Israel or have visited the Vatican

Maybe you've never crossed an ocean

but have revisited a place that felt thin with God's presence:

a retreat centre, a camp, a church where you were married or baptized.

Ever since watching the film 'The Way',

I've wanted to walk the Camino de Santiago.

I've always wondered if taking the time for such a journey

Would plunge me deeper into a relationship with God.

Those who consider themselves religious

Are often drawn to extraordinary places.

Maybe you enjoy sitting in the great cathedrals in Europe,

And maybe you sometime come here a little early

So you can soak up the space.

In the time of Jesus, the Jerusalem Temple

Was the center of religion in Israel.

Yes people prayed in their homes,

And Scripture was taught in the synagogues.

But the Temple was still central.

It was a place for pilgrimage and prayer.

It was the only legitimate place for sacrifice.

The Temple was understood to be the place of God's presence,
Where heaven and earth met (even if the Ark of the Covenant,
Had disappeared during the Babylonian invasion).

[Mishnah, Yoma 5:2 – explicitly notes the absence of the Ark]

The law called all Israelite males

to make annual trips to the Temple.

The explains the appearance of Jesus

In today's reading, who had come

at the time of the Jewish Passover.

[Exodus 23:14–17; Deuteronomy 16:16]

You may recall that story from Jesus' childhood,

How Jesus was discovered to be missing

From the village migration home after festival,

And was found in the temple courts talking with the teachers.

When his parents reprimanded him

For not staying with the group he responded:

"Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"

[Luke 2:46-49]

Jesus loved the Temple.

The people loved the Temple.

it was the place

of God's dwelling;

It was the place they expected to encounter God.

Listen to these words of the Psalmist:

"One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek:

That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,

To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord

And to seek him in his temple." [Psalm 27:4]

This desire for God's presence in the Temple

Helps explain today's Bible lesson.

When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem,
And enters the Temple court,
He is confronted with a busy market,
Where people were selling animals for sacrifice
And exchanging currency for payment of the Temple tax.

What Jesus sees is not just commerce,
but prayer being pushed aside
especially the prayers of those who had no other place to go.

In a previous time that market,
Which was a helpful service for those
Travelling long distances,
Was located “across the Kidron Valley on the slopes of the Mount of Olives,
but at this point they were in the temple courts,
doubtless in the Court of the Gentiles (the outermost court).”
[Carson 178]

We don’t know why this move was made,
Whether it was designed for benefit of the worshippers
Or the vendors or the priests who managed the Temple precinct.

But what was clear from today’s reading is that this market was
Crowding out space in that outer court,
The largest and most accessible court
Where non-Jews could come
To pray, to listen to teaching,
And to participate as “God-fearers”.
If we turn to the other Gospels
In what is maybe another Temple visit,
Jesus’ levels an additional charge
Calling the market a ‘den of robbers’.
That market wasn’t just crowding out space for worship
but was taking advantage of pilgrims.

In this way Jesus may be leveling a greater indictment
Against the Temple complex itself:

From Herod who expanded it (ostensibly out of his own pocket)
But certainly from the riches he had taken in other ways from the people;
To the Priests who may have been receiving financial kickbacks
For allowing vendors space in this place;
To the actual vendors
Who were likely using their prime real estate
To charge unfair prices
And profit from people’s desire
To be reconciled to God.

Jesus sees what is happening,
And in righteous anger disrupts the market
By flipping over tables and driving out the animals
With their owners and shouting:
“Stop turning my Father’s house into a shopping mall!”

You can imagine that this wasn’t well received
By those who were now picking up their coins,
And trying to gather the wandering animals.
They don’t question the legitimacy of Jesus’ critique
But his authority in removing them.
[I’m sure they all had the right up-to-date permits
Issued by the temple authorities.]

Surmising that Jesus was some sort of prophet,
they asked Jesus for a sign, a demonstration
That he was God’s authorised representative:
“What credentials can you present to justify this?”
They ask.

Jesus responds:
“Tear down this Temple and in three days I’ll put it back together.”

They find Jesus’ response ludicrous.
Herod’s renovation of the Second Temple
Had taken decades and was still ongoing.
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he suggestion that Jesus could do in three days
What Herod was taking years to accomplish was preposterous.

Of course they were misunderstanding Jesus
(As is often the case for Jesus' listeners in the Gospel of John).

When Jesus talks about tearing down and restoring
They are thinking terms of stone and years.
But Jesus was offering them the sign of his own death and resurrection,
How he, the 'lamb of God',
would offer his own body as a sacrifice,
And take over the function of the Temple
As being the place, actually the person
Where heaven and earth meet.

The people can't comprehend what he is saying.
Jesus' own disciples can't understand this either
Until they reconsider his words in the light of his resurrection.

This story of John asserts something extremely important about Jesus.

What it tells us is that Jesus isn't simply a reformer of worship,
Like that prophet Jeremiah we heard from in our Old Testament reading,
Who told the people they could not trust in the presence of the Temple
If they didn't reform their behavior.

Jesus isn't simply a reformer of worship like one of the prophets,
And he isn't a reformer of worship like the kings Hezekiah or Josiah,
who removed idolatrous objects or reinstated Scripture reading.

The prophets called Israel to reform the Temple;
faithful kings tried to repair it
but Jesus does something far more radical:
he becomes it.

Jesus becomes the person, the place,
Where sacrifice is made,

Where forgiveness is received,
Where God is encountered.

PAUSE

But what does that mean for us?
Jesus fulfills the function of the Temple,
But is now resurrection and ascended.
So how do we encounter him?

The Reformer, John Calvin, notes that the church
That is the body of Christ is found wherever
You find 'the pure preaching of the Word of God'
And the 'right administration of the sacraments'.

Calvin states in the *Institutes* ""Wherever we see
the Word of God purely preached and heard,
and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution,
there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists."
(*Institutes* IV.1.9)

If the body of Christ is present
then Christ can reliably be encountered.
This is not saying that institutions still hold a vice grip on God.

You can have a small gathering of believers in a home
Or a large gathering in a dedicated building.

And I am not saying that Christ doesn't meet people elsewhere,
Just that Christ will be present in the midst of those
Who are obediently sharing and following
All that he has taught and commanded.

This provides great freedom and some restriction.

The freedom is that you don't need to go out on pilgrimage
to the Christian Camp of your youth
or walk the Camino de Santiago to encounter God
and know that you are forgiven.
Jesus is the new temple and is reliably present
In the scores of humble places
Where the faithful gather.
When Christ is proclaimed
when bread is broken and the cup is shared
Christ will meet us there.

The restriction is that when we pull back from Christian community
We are effectively setting ourselves adrift.
There are no guardrails for what we preach ourselves.
I know of few people who take the trouble
Of celebrating the Lord's Supper on their own.
God has called us together in Jesus.
In obedient community Jesus is reliably present
And will accomplish his good purposes in us.
Amen.

Let's pray.