

A Tale of Two Temples

In the name of the Lord who is our righteousness, dear friends in Christ: I hope the title of this message, *A Tale of Two Temples*, is not misleading. I was riffing on Charles Dickens' classic *A Tale of Two Cities*, and not implying that what I'm going to say is a work of fiction. It's not. The two temples under our consideration are (or in the case of one of them was) very real. And knowing the similarities and differences between these two temples is the key to understanding what Paul is saying in today's Epistle lesson taken from his letter to the members of the church at Ephesus. For these Christians to whom Paul wrote it's very much a "before and after" sort of thing: how things were for them formerly under the original temple, and how much better they are now for everyone under the new and improved version.

The first temple, the one Solomon built in Jerusalem (and was later rebuilt under Zerubbabel) was all about barriers, boundaries that could not be crossed. It was like at Mount Sinai where only Moses could go up on the mountain into the presence of the Lord while everyone else stayed behind a clearly marked line. To trespass meant instant death.

So it was at the temple. The Lord chose the location on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem and said, "This is where I will make my gracious presence dwell with you on earth. Here's where I am placing my name in your midst, you my chosen people. Here's where you can direct your prayers and I will hear you. And here is where you can offer sacrifices so that by them your sins may be forgiven."

But again, the layout of the temple was all about barriers. Starting from the innermost chamber in the sanctuary called the Holy of Holies. This is where the Ark of the Covenant rested above which hovered the Shekinah, the "glory cloud", a visible manifestation of the Lord's gracious presence. Only the high priest could enter this chamber, and only once a year on the great Day of Atonement when he would expiate the people's sins by pouring sacrificial blood on the top of the Ark which was known as the Mercy Seat – God's throne on earth.

A heavy curtain divided this inner chamber from the outer chamber that was called the Holy Place. This area was entered twice daily, at the time of the morning and evening sacrifices. A priest chosen by lot would come in and offer prayers at the Altar of Incense which stood immediately before the curtain behind which was the Ark and the glory of the Lord.

Just outside the temple building and surrounding it on all sides was the court of the priests, which could only be entered by select members of the tribe of Levi. This is where the sacrificial animals were slain and their blood was poured out on the burning altar. Beyond that was the court of Jewish men; the idea being that they acted as priests for their families. Next came the the court of Jewish women and children. And beyond that the outermost court was for the Gentiles – those who were not of God's chosen people Israel.

And no one presumed to cross a barrier and come closer to the Lord than he or she was allowed to. To do so was punishable by death. This was understood; or in the case of the court of the Gentiles (since they might not be aware of it) signs were posted saying that very thing.

The purpose of all this was to convey a number of ideas. First that this was indeed the dwelling place of God on earth. It was sacred territory. Proper reverence needed to be

rendered by all. This was the Lord's house and his rules applied here. It also emphasized the Lord's absolute holiness in contrast to his people's sinfulness. And sin is a huge problem – bigger than any of us really recognize. The Lord hates it. Sinners cannot come into the presence of the Lord and live. The Lord was right there only a relatively small number of steps away, but you as a sinner couldn't get to him. Walls for your own protection stood in the way. What you needed was somebody to go to the Lord for you, somebody designated by the Lord for that task, somebody who carried before the Lord a sacrifice of blood by which he in mercy forgave your sins.

In Lutheran terms, the temple's layout is a picture of Law and Gospel. Law in that the justice of God must be upheld. There must be death for sin as the Law demands. And Gospel in that the Lord was willing to accept the death of a substitute through the hands of his chosen agents, which ultimately points to Christ and his work of atonement. And this was all very good, the way it was supposed to be under the old covenant.

But where did it leave the Gentile people to whom Paul was writing who were living in a place like Ephesus, which was a major Greek seaport on the west coast of what is Turkey today? It left them out. That's what Paul is saying in this morning's text. "Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." Oh, they had their gods; lots of them. The temple of Dianna in Ephesus was one of the wonders of the ancient world. But they were false gods, dumb idols, without power, their stories myths based on the lies of the devil. These people lived in complete spiritual darkness, as far from the Lord and the light of his truth as they could be. As such they lived under the curse and wrath of God.

But suppose one or more of them became aware of the truth. They met some faithful Jews living in the Diaspora, that is, among the Gentiles, and these Jews were willing to share their faith. They instructed their Gentile neighbors in the ways and covenants of the one true God, and hearing they became believers. (Mind you, this didn't happen often. Jews in the Diaspora weren't very evangelistic. But suppose it happened as it sometimes did.) What would this mean for the Gentile believers? It would mean that to properly worship the Lord, they'd have to travel to Jerusalem where they would be allowed no closer than the outermost court of the temple – the same court on which the religious authorities permitted the money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals to hawk their wares. So, take the trip of a lifetime in order to stand in a sheep pen and market place where you could pray toward a wall on which was posted a sign that said "come any closer and you die". Hardly a moving spiritual experience. And even back at home in Ephesus when you went to synagogue to hear God's Word, there'd be the Jewish men sitting up front, their wives and children behind them, and you, the lowly Gentile had to sit in the back. No Jew would invite you into their home, nor would they accept an invitation from you. And nobody would even think of touching anything you brought to a church potluck. The message was clear: you're not one of us, not one of the chosen. You aren't so much welcome here as you are tolerated – and barely that.

The work of Christ changed all of this. As Paul tells the Gentile believers (which would include all of us), "But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility." This is good news indeed. Christ Jesus is the universal great high priest who offered to God not the blood of goats or lambs, but his own. He laid down his perfect life on the cross for the sins of the whole world. He made the one sacrifice that all the others had only pointed to. And recall that when he died the heavy curtain in the temple tore in two from top to bottom. The barrier was gone – not so that people could

get in to where the Lord was, but rather so that the Lord could come out and dwell directly with his people, his people made righteous and holy through faith in the blood of Christ.

Who are these people? Any and everyone who believes. *All* the barriers are gone. There is no longer a distinction between Jew and Gentile. They are all made one in Christ. All have full forgiveness and perfect peace with God through him.

And no longer is it necessary to go the temple in Jerusalem to worship. No, the temple comes to you as Paul says of Christ, "He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near." As Jesus said to his apostles, "Who hears you, hears me." Thus Jesus came in the words of those he sent proclaiming his salvation to Jew and Gentile alike. Through whom Paul says, "we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord."

The original temple has been superseded. It served its function; but now it's finished – finished when on the cross Jesus declared "It is finished." And since that time, work on the new temple is underway; this temple not being built by human hands, but being built by God's Word of human bodies. The foundation is the teaching of the prophets and the apostles: the prophets who declared what the Christ would do when he came, and the apostles who gave eyewitness testimony of all that he said and did – chiefly that he died for sin and rose again on the third day.

All who hear this message and believe it are being joined together as one, the living stones of the new temple in which the holy God dwells on earth, each stone aligned and focused on Christ the cornerstone.

And the thing to see is that a temple is a place of activity. It's where God's work happens. God's work in us as we continue to hear his Word and receive the benefits of Christ's sacrifice – namely the forgiveness of sin, salvation, and eternal life; God's work through us as moved by the Spirit we learn to love, support, and serve each other; God's work beyond us as he uses us to reach out to others without regard to race, age, sex, or social standing who as yet are without God and without hope in the world with the Word of Christ's truth in the hope of incorporating them also into this magnificent temple that is the dwelling place of God.

By God's abounding grace we who were once far off are part of this divine building project. Therefore may this grand construction work of the Lord on his temple continue in, through, and beyond each of us until that day when once again Christ Jesus our Savior declares "It is finished." In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!