

The Temple of the Lord

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

Columbus, Ohio

February 5, 2012

Scripture Readings

Malachi 3:1-4 (Psalm 84)

Hebrews 2:14-18

Luke 2:22-40

Sermon

I messed up last week. I went online to find the Lectionary readings for today. But I made a mistake. I picked up the readings for the Festival of the Presentation of the Lord instead. That festival is an occasion to remember when the eight day old baby Jesus was brought to the Temple in Jerusalem to be redeemed by a sacrifice, because he was Mary's firstborn.

I didn't discover my mistake for several days. When I did, I decided to leave it alone. Who knows? Maybe God has some reason for us to pay attention to the Scriptures we heard this morning.

ONE THING THAT FIGURES IN ALL of those Scriptures, including the psalm even, is the Temple of the LORD. So let's think about the Temple for a while.

In the Bible, the Temple of the LORD is one of several structures. First, there is the Tabernacle, which was a portable Temple, a tent the Israelites took with them from place to place. A few weeks ago, we read a passage from 1 Samuel, which said that the boy Samuel was ministering in the Temple (cf. 1 Samuel 3:1,3). The reference is to the portable Temple, what we usually call the Tabernacle.

It was King David who decided to build a real, stay-in-one-place Temple for the LORD. David himself had a royal house. It was only fitting that the LORD should have a royal residence, too. David didn't get to commission that Temple-building project. That was left to Solomon, his son. Solomon expended massive amounts of human and material resources to build an appropriately grand house for God. Most often, when the Old Testament refers to the Temple of the LORD, Solomon's Temple is in view.

Now, of course, the Babylonians destroyed Solomon's Temple. They stripped everything out of the building, then reduced it to rubble. But that Temple, the Temple of the LORD, was never forgotten.

AFTER A GROUP OF EXILES RETURNED to Jerusalem, they rebuilt the city's walls and eventually built a new Temple. This one is usually called the Second Temple, though not in the Bible itself. It really wasn't much of a Temple, certainly not compared to the memory of Solomon's Temple, which probably got grander with every telling.

It's the second Temple that figures in the story of Jesus. Only it wasn't so second-rate any more. Herod the Great had become king in Judea, thanks to the Romans. And to establish his *bona fides* as the King of the Jews, Herod set to work fancying up the Temple.

Because David the Great King and his heir Solomon had been responsible for the first and greatest Temple, the common expectation was that when the Jews finally had a king again, that king would take care of the Temple: would purify it, would beautify it, would bring it up to snuff as the Temple of the LORD. And so Herod expended great human and material resources on a project to put the Temple right. It went along with being King of the Jews.

SO WHEN THE BIBLE REFERS TO the Temple of the LORD, it can have the Tabernacle in mind. Or Solomon's Temple. Or the second Temple. Or Herod's fancied-up second Temple. There's also the great, new Temple envisioned by the prophet Ezekiel (cf. Ezekiel 40). And when we get to the very end of the Bible, the New Jerusalem as a whole is very much like a Temple.

The New Jerusalem is instructive, because there is no separate Temple in the city. Instead we are told that the Lord is the Temple (cf. Revelation 21:22). We are also told that in the New Jerusalem, God is living in the midst of his people (cf. Revelation 21:3). Which bring us to what's going on, from the start, with the Temple of the Lord.

THE TEMPLE OF THE LORD WAS THE PLACE where the Lord lived in the midst of his people. The Temple was the place where heaven and earth were mysteriously joined together. Heaven, of course, is the word the Bible uses for the place where God lives. And earth is the place where we human beings live. When God resides in the Temple, it means that heaven and earth have come together in that place.

There was a sign that God was in the Temple. It was the great cloud of glory. That cloud made its most famous appearance when Solomon dedicated his great Temple. We read in 1 Kings 8 that *a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD* (vv. 10-11).

But something happened. In time the Babylonians would destroy the Temple of the LORD. The people had been sure something like that would never happen, could never happen. They had been sure that Jerusalem was secure. They had said to themselves, *The Temple of the LORD! The Temple of the LORD! The Temple of the LORD!* (cf. Jeremiah 7:4). In other words, the LORD was in the Temple and the Temple was in the city, so the city was secure. But Ezekiel had a vision, and in his vision the glory of the LORD left the Temple, left the Temple and the city (cf. Ezekiel 10). And then the Babylonians did their worst.

Later, when the small band of returned exiles built the second Temple, the second-rate Temple, it wasn't second-rate only because of the quality of the stone and the furnishings. It was second-rate because the cloud of glory had not come back. The LORD had not returned.

AND SO A HOPE GREW. An expectation developed. Some day. Some day. Some day, as Malachi put it, some day a messenger will come, preparing the way. *And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple* (cf. Malachi 3:1). Malachi is the last of the prophets. He speaks. He speaks his word of hope. Then the voice of prophecy falls silent.

From time to time hope erupts, only to be disappointed. Even Herod's much-improved Temple, Herod's first-rate Temple, doesn't have what it takes. Always there is something missing. Always there is the waiting: waiting for the Lord to come to his Temple, waiting for a new and unmistakable eruption of glory, waiting for the Lord himself to come and to be Israel's king – not Herod, not Caesar, not anybody else.

Simeon is waiting, waiting for *the consolation of Israel*, waiting for the fulfillment of those long-lingering hopes. And Anna is waiting, waiting in the Temple day after day, night after night. And while they're busy waiting, a couple come in carrying a baby. They come to make a sacrifice. They come, expecting the Temple to live up to its purpose, to be a place of redemption, where their first-born son can be set free from obligation. It's a completely ordinary event.

Completely ordinary. Yet Simeon takes the child in his arms and bursts out in praise and prophesies a challenging path ahead. Completely ordinary. Yet Anna, too, has an outburst of praise. And it's all because of the child, all because of the child who has come to the Temple.

The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple. That was the hope. That was the promise. That was the expectation.

Both Simeon and Anna had a flash of recognition. It's not likely that they understood who exactly the child was. It's not likely that they recognized the child as anything more than a servant of the LORD, maybe even the servant of the LORD, the one Isaiah had spoken about so eloquently. But, of course, the child was that and a lot more.

WITH THE ARRIVAL OF JESUS, eight day old baby Jesus, at the Temple, the glory of the Lord at last returns. God has come once again to be among his people. The Temple of the Lord truly is in Jerusalem. God is dwelling in the midst of his people.

Ah, but it's not so simple. The building with its massive and closely-fitted stones, with its rich appointments, with the constant smell of incense and the incessant activity of piety and devotion – the building is only a shell, a shell soon enough to be demolished for good. And well it could be, because the real Temple of the Lord is in their midst.

As in the final biblical vision, the Temple is not a building and not even an entire city. The Lord himself is the Temple. The Lord himself directly living in the midst of his people. Jesus is the Temple of the Lord. Jesus is the place where heaven and earth meet.

Baby Jesus was redeemed at Herod's Temple, fulfilling all righteousness. But Jesus himself will be the place of redemption, the place of mercy and forgiveness. In Jesus, the Lord God shares our flesh and blood (cf. Hebrews 2:14). In that flesh and blood, he is

the sacrificial lamb. In that flesh and blood, he accomplishes the merciful purpose of the Temple of the Lord, becoming himself the sacrifice of atonement, setting his people free from death and its tyrannies (cf. Hebrews 2:17). Jesus himself is the Temple of the Lord.

NOW THAT'S A LOT OF THEOLOGICAL TALK. And that may not be the best thing for a sermon. Then again, maybe it is okay once in a while. But here's something in a more usual sermonic mode.

We have all of these ideas and realities connected with the Temple of the Lord. The Temple of the Lord is the place where heaven and earth meet, the place where God is present among his people. The Temple of the Lord is the place of mercy and forgiveness.

Well, if the Temple of the Lord is all that – and it is – then what does it mean when the New Testament says that we, the church of Jesus Christ – we are the Temple of the Lord? What does it mean that, through the Holy Spirit, we are the dwelling place of God? (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:16).

We are the Temple of the Lord. We are the dwelling place of God. But what does that mean when anger is planted in our homes and we can't find a way to uproot it? And what does it mean when neighborhoods are crumbling and community leaders can't muster the collective will to stop the decay? And what does it mean when millions are locked up in prisons with little hope of reconciliation and restoration, while corporations are figuring out ways to profit from their misery?

We are the Temple of the Lord. We are the dwelling place of God.

What does that mean for the church, except that we proclaim Christ as Lord in the face of every other authority? What does it mean, except that we bear the cross that is laid upon those who seek the kingdom of God first? What does it mean, except that we hang on to the hope that is ours in Christ, a hope that even death and all its tyrannies cannot defeat?

Jesus was torn down by the powers. He was looted and crushed. But the Temple of his flesh was rebuilt in three days. Now and forever he is Immanuel, God with us.

✠

In the name of the Father
and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit.

✠