

The Holy Place

A few minutes ago, we read the joyous words of the psalmist: *the firmament proclaims God's handiwork!*

Have *you* ever stood under a night sky and wondered at the glory of the countless stars above? If so, was that, for you, a holy place?

Have you ever walked the beach at twilight and felt the caress of God's breath in the sea breeze and marveled at the majestic power of an ocean rolling to the horizon and beyond? If so, was that, for you, a holy place?

Have you ever, on a mountainside, been awed by the infinite tender haze of ridge after ridge of ancient hills receding into misty distance? If so, was that, for you, a holy place?

Have you ever wandered through deep woods and been amazed by the splendor of blazing autumn color that arched in a great canopy over your head and stretched as far as your eyes could see? If so, was that, for you, a holy place?

Whether or not you've experienced any or all of these settings, you *have* sat in this beautiful sanctuary on Sunday

mornings, many of you for most of your lives. Today you have come to a holy place.

A sacred place. A set-apart place. In this reading from John's Gospel, first-century believers have come to *their* holy place. Their Temple. The chosen people, who have been dispersed all over the known world, make pilgrimage to Jerusalem each year to celebrate the Passover. To worship the One who has delivered and redeemed them. To bring tithes and make sacrifices to their God.

Many of them have traveled long distances, journeyed too far to bring sacrificial animals with them. They have to purchase animals when they arrive. And the tithe money they've brought from home—the coinage of Empire—bears the head of Caesar who proclaims himself to be divine. This graven image violates God's second commandment. The coins that bear this idolatrous image can't be used in the Temple. This money has to be exchanged for legal currency.

So we understand that money-changers and merchants selling animals make temple worship possible. Under the watchful eyes of the religious leadership, that is. And on this

day, activity in the temple courtyard is proceeding without a hitch. The authorities nod in satisfaction.

That is, until some unknown from up the country shows up. Dark eyes flashing, brandishing a whip. Bold. Brazen! He's everywhere at once—overturning the tables of the money-changers. Slings their coins flying, clattering across the stones of the temple floor. Driving bellowing cattle and bleating lambs out of the courtyard. Shouting *get these doves out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a marketplace!*

Pharisees, scribes, even the high priest himself stare with jaw-dropping incredulity. They can't believe their eyes. Or their ears. *Galilean accent*, they mutter to one another. *Outside agitator!* Someone in the crowd thinks he's a rabbi. Thinks his name is Jesus. This Jesus person—whoever he is—has totally disrupted the business of the Temple—and on the busiest festival day of the year. He's brought the whole operation to a standstill.

The Jews are incensed. Now when John the Evangelist mentions “the Jews” it's important for us to remember that he does *not* mean Jews of every time and place. John is referring specifically to particular religious authorities of first-century

Jerusalem. Those who oppose Jesus from the beginning. From the time he clears the Temple.

Which is a significant event in Jesus' ministry—one of the few that's described in all four gospels. The other gospels suggest that the corruption of merchant and money-changer stir righteous anger in Jesus. Is it not both intimidating and intriguing to us to envision an angry Jesus? If Jesus walked into a large twenty-first century church and saw in the narthex a machine to insert your debit card into and withdraw cash for your offering, would that anger him?

Maybe our thought process goes something like this: *I'm human. And I get angry. So if Jesus got angry, that's proof of his humanity.*

But the thing is, *everything* Jesus did was done by One who was fully human. One with a body that could grow tired. A body that could thirst. A body that could eat. A body that could be touched, even after his resurrection. Jesus is the One who puts on the flesh of a human body. John carefully makes this plain to readers of his Gospel.

And in John's Gospel, we get to see this Jesus in the Temple from a fresh perspective. Through a new lens. In this

holy place, Jesus puts a halt to business as usual in order to call attention to a different holy place. To another *kind* of holy place.

Which becomes clear after he's confronted by irate religious leaders: *Just who do you think you are? What can you possibly do or say to warrant the chaos and havoc you have wreaked in our holy place?*

That's when his followers recall a prophetic scripture: *Zeal for your house will consume me*. They wonder just what this act will cost him. Passion for God's house will bring Jesus suffering and death.

And he knows. Knowing all that lies ahead, Jesus gives temple leaders the sign they've demanded: *Destroy this temple, tear it down, and in three days I'll raise it back up*.

“Excuse me? In three days you're going to rebuild our Temple? A temple that's been under construction for *forty-six years?*

Not too many buildings take that long to complete. One notable exception is the Washington National Cathedral, which sits atop Mount Saint Alban overlooking the city of Washington, DC. It's known as *a house of prayer for all people*. The Cathedral's foundation stone—taken from a field near

Bethlehem—was laid in nineteen-o-seven, as President Theodore Roosevelt addressed the crowd. Twenty years later, when my mother moved to Washington as a teenager, she and her family lived just down the street. And she began to watch the Cathedral continuing to take shape. Through all the decades of my mother’s twentieth-century life in the Washington area, she witnessed work on the Cathedral progressing.

It’s been the site of national prayer services for the inaugurations of presidents since Franklin Roosevelt, and for several presidential state funerals as well.

In nineteen-ninety—*eighty-three years* after construction began—my mother, then nearly eighty herself, was there to see the placing of the west towers’ last finial. She saw the completion of the National Cathedral. My mother loved the Cathedral. It was—for her—and is today, for so many others, a holy place.

Just as the Jerusalem Temple was a holy place for worshipers and religious authorities in the gospel narrative we hear today. Surely at least some of those leaders had—for decades—watched their Temple being built.

And when Jesus declares that if the Temple is destroyed, he will raise it up in three days, they take his words literally. They don't get that he's speaking of an entirely different *kind* of temple. They misunderstand. Their Temple was an impressive edifice. And, as one interpreter puts it, "they were far more impressed with brick and mortar than they were with flesh and blood." They weren't too impressed with Jesus. They didn't know the identity of this One who was standing right in front of them.

If you and I had been in their sandals, would we have known who was standing right in front of *us*? Would we have reacted any differently?

For those religious leaders, in the faith of their ancestors, the Temple had been and still was the location where God dwelt on earth. The Temple had been and still was the place of the Holy One, and had housed the Ark of the Covenant that contained the stone tablets bearing God's commandments.

The Temple had been and still was their holy place. And as far as they knew, the Temple would always be their holy place.

They didn't know. They didn't know that God has come to earth in the body of Jesus. They didn't know that his body is a

living, breathing temple. They didn't know that God has done something new! They didn't know that there is now a *new* holy place.

But followers of Jesus *do* know.

We know that the holy place is the body of Christ.

The holy place is the body of Christ with which, by the Spirit's power, you and I are filled today so that we might grow more like him in holiness.

The holy place is the body of Christ which is all of his followers gathered together.

The holy place is the body of Christ that we, by grace, can become for the world. Being his hands and his feet. Speaking his words. And sharing his good news!

The holy place is the body of Christ where divine and human meet.

The holy place is the body of Christ where you and I are delivered and redeemed, where we are forgiven and brought back to the God in whom we live, the God who loves us, always and forever.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.