

Trinity 10
Luke 19:41-48
God Dwells with His Church
Pastor James Preus
Trinity Lutheran Church
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Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple was one of his most controversial prophesies. It filled his disciples with wonder and his enemies with ire. The idea that the temple would be destroyed was offensive to the religious elites, because the temple was what set apart the Jewish people from all other nations. God dwelt in the temple. To say that the temple would be destroyed was tantamount to claiming that God would abandon Israel. Jerusalem was God's holy city! And the temple was God's chosen dwelling place, above the Mercy Seat in the Holy of Holies.

Yet, Jesus prophesied that the city of Jerusalem along with the temple would be destroyed. How can this be? Did not God command that the temple be built? And did he not meticulously instruct the priests on how to perform sacrifices and services to him in the temple? Did he not promise the people of Israel that he would be their God and dwell with them in the temple and accept sacrifices from them?

Yes, indeed God did all these things. Yet, his dwelling in the temple was not the end. Rather, God's dwelling in the temple and the sacrifices that took place in the temple were shadows of what was to come. Christ Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophesy. In him dwells the full Godhead bodily. Jesus Christ, true God in human flesh is the fulfillment of the temple. And Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross was the fulfillment of all the sacrifices performed in the temple. When Jesus fulfilled the prophesy, there was no longer any need for the shadow. The substance had arrived.

Also, God's presence was not restricted to the temple against his will, as if God had been caged in a building of stone built by men. Rather, God blessed the people of Israel with his presence through the Gospel, which can only be received through faith. The sacrifices in the temple were meant to be a proclamation of the Gospel, which can only benefit those who believe. Performing rituals is not enough. Without faith, God will not abide. This is what the Prophet Isaiah wrote,

“Thus says the LORD: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.’” (Isaiah 66:1-2) God makes clear that a temple will not benefit the people if they do not repent of their sins and listen to his word with proper fear. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” (Proverbs 9:10) God dwells with those who fear his name.

Isaiah goes on,

“He who slaughters an ox is like one who kills a man; he who sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog’s neck; he who presents a grain offering, like one who offers pig’s blood; he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like one who blesses an idol. These have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations; I also will choose harsh treatment for them and bring their fears upon them, because when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, they did not listen; but they did what was evil in my eyes and chose that in which I did not delight.” (Isaiah 66:3-4)

These are remarkable words from the Prophet Isaiah. He basically runs through the book of Leviticus and condemns those who perform the ceremonies commanded by God through Moses! How can this be? How can God be displeased with sacrifices, which he himself commanded? Because they did them as their soul delighted in abominations. They had no faith in the God of Israel. They thought God would be pleased simply by outward acts. Meanwhile, they went and worshipped other gods, committed adultery, slander, and theft. They followed their own hearts and did not fear the LORD. So, God did not accept their offerings. He regarded them as he did Cain’s. It is exactly as King David said in Psalm 51, “For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

And these words from the prophets and our Lord should teach us Christians today how we should regard our church buildings and outward religious actions. It is really easy to become infatuated with a church building. Because Christians desire to present their best to the Lord, many church buildings are

beautiful and show magnificent architectural skill. And when you add on the emotional pull, when you are married in a church building, when your children are baptized in it, when your parents were married there and your children, and so forth, the building becomes more special. Church-goers are known to worship the building instead of the God to whom the building is dedicated. If God warned through his prophets to not worship the temple or trust in it, which was a much more magnificent building than any church you've ever seen, then we too should take heed not to worship this or any other church building.

Likewise, we should pay attention to our worship. Simply showing up to church and carrying out the motions is not what makes one a Christian. It is faith in Christ. God saw the priests and the people come to the temple and perform the ceremonies he commanded. Yet, he saw in their hearts that they were far from him. They did not listen to his word or trust in him. When we come to church to worship, we should keep in mind that we come to worship Christ, to receive forgiveness and salvation from him, and to learn from him.

Jesus said, "My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers." Obviously, we can see the connection between those who sell in the temple and robbers. These sellers were cheats. They took advantage of pilgrims traveling to perform their vows to the Lord. They overpriced their goods. Besides, the temple was no place to carry out such business, let alone a place to cheat and steal! Yet, the greatest robbery was not the unfair prices of doves and sheep or dishonest exchange rates for currency. The greatest robbery was performed by the priests and Pharisees, who taught lies to the people and left them ignorant of the Gospel.

Jesus quoted Jeremiah chapter 7, where God warned against the deceptive words of the priests who promised that God was pleased with the people, saying, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD" even as they made offerings to Baal, stole, murdered, and slandered. God said they spoke, "deceptive words" and then accused them of turning his house into a den of robbers. That is the robbery that God is most concerned with. The robbery of God's word from the ears and hearts of the people. And this is demonstrated by Jesus, who cleansed the temple not simply by turning over a few tables, but by daily teaching the people in the temple.

Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” (John 2: 19) The temple made of stones was destroyed in 70 AD and has not been rebuilt. But Jesus did not mean the temple made by human hands. He meant his own body, which was torn down and buried in a tomb. After three days Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus did not abandon his human flesh, but forever the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily in Christ Jesus our brother and our Savior. How can we doubt God’s love for us when he forever shares our flesh and blood having redeemed us with his own blood!

Yet, we cannot ascend to heaven to see Jesus. He must descend to us. And he does so through his word. God now dwells in the hearts of believers, who hang on Jesus’ words, just as they did when Jesus taught in the temple. That is what Jesus taught us by teaching in the temple. The building of the temple is gone, but Jesus’ words are still spoken. So, where Jesus’ Christians gather to hear his word, there God makes his dwelling place.

St. Paul teaches us in Ephesians chapter 3 that Christ dwells in our hearts through faith. In fact, he teaches us that through the knowledge of the love of God in Christ Jesus, the whole fulness of God fills us. We are the very temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6). The dwelling place of God on earth is in the hearts of believers, who fear his name, hear his Word, and believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior. This body of Christ is called the Holy Christian Church. It is invisible, because only God can see the faith in the heart of a believer. And an unbeliever is not going to believe that God dwells in a Christian. His eyes cannot see it. This is why it depends on faith. This is why we confess it in the Creed, “I believe in one, holy, Christian, and apostolic Church.” We confess our faith in the one Church of Christ just as we confess that Christ himself sits at the right hand of God the Father, although we cannot see it.

The Church is invisible, but that does not mean that you cannot find it. Many Christians have been fooled into believing that you do not need to go to church to be a Christian, because after all, God does not dwell in buildings made by human hands and the church is invisible. Jesus dwells within my heart. Yet, Jesus does not dwell in your heart apart from hearing the *Gospel* of Jesus. Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice.” And “If you abide in my words, you are my disciples indeed. And you will know

the truth and the truth shall set you free.” The church was gathered in the temple where Jesus was teaching his people. And the Church always gathers where Christ’s words are spoken.

So, although we rightly say that the Church is invisible and that God dwells invisibly in the hearts of believers, we also rightly say that the Church is where the word of God is taught in its truth and purity and where the Sacraments are rightly administered. Where Jesus is proclaimed as crucified for the sins of all people and raised for the justification of all; where people are baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in order to be reborn as a child of God; where Christ’s body and blood are fed to his Christians in the Sacrament of the Altar; that is where Christ’s Church is. Because that is where Jesus promises to be even until the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

So, the message of Jesus today is not that we should not go to church buildings to worship, but rather that we should worship God instead of the buildings. And church buildings used for the gathering of Christ’s church should be frequently cleansed. All idolatry and worldly lust should be swept out of them, and the pure Gospel of Christ Jesus should be taught, so that God may dwell in the hearts of his people through faith. The purpose of churches is not to give practical advice on how to live a moral or successful life in this world. No, the purpose of churches is for Christ Jesus to be proclaimed as crucified, so that sinners may know that they have a gracious God, who forgives them. Churches exist so that Christians may depart with Christ dwelling in their hearts through faith; so that Christ Jesus may live in them and through them as they pour out the love of God to their family and neighbors. Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah, who said, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” This prophecy is fulfilled by the preaching of the Gospel, which has spread to all nations, so that wherever the Gospel is proclaimed, people lift up acceptable prayers to God. May God dwell in all your hearts through faith in the Gospel, so that this house may always be a house of prayer. And may its walls crumble and fall before the Gospel ceases to be preached in it. Amen.