

"No Temple in the City"
Revelation 21 22-27, 22:1-5
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This is the third and final in a series of sermons from the Book of Revelation on the subject of worship. The first, "Doxology," dealt with glorifying God in every circumstance of life.

The second was titled "Amen!" Most of you will remember that one, because it was delivered just last Sunday, and because, in an impromptu fashion, you helped me preach it! On earth, as in heaven, divine worship is positive, upbeat, YES; for in Christ Jesus all our yesses find their Amen!

Today we turn to one phrase from the 21st chapter of Revelation; "and I saw no temple in the city." The focus is on the Jerusalem Temple and the New Jerusalem.

I dimly remember Professor Fred Craddock's telling of this story, so my details may not be accurate in every respect; but see what you can

make of it.

The train pulled into the station at the city's center. It was Sunday morning, and the weather was fine. The traveler had a several-hour layover until his next train; so he decided to wander around downtown and find a church where he could worship. He left his bags at the station, so he was free of encumbrances.

In a leisurely fashion my friend walked the city streets, block after block, surveying this beautiful metropolis. So engrossed was he in the cityscape, and so great was his enjoyment of the day, that he had moved to the edge of the downtown area before he realized he had seen no temple in the city. He had heard no carillon, observed no spire.

Continuing his walk now into a suburban area, our traveler felt the first traces of anxiety in the pit of his stomach. He was wearing no timepiece, but from the angle of the sun and the length of his walk, he imagined that the hour must be approaching eleven o'clock.

Increasing his pace, he now began to crane his

neck and narrow his gaze to discern a church building. Still nothing. The birds sang, but no church bells pealed to call the faithful to worship.

Now he was in an area of fine, large, older homes. He saw a man raking his lawn and decided to ask the time and directions to the nearest church

"Good morning!"

"Morning."

"I was hoping to find a worship service to attend."

"You're in luck. We do that a lot in this city."

"What time is it, please?"

"Eleven o'clock."

"Could you direct me to a church?"

"Oh, there are none around here."

"Well, I saw no temple in the city, either."

"No."

"I don't understand."

"You're new here, aren't you?"

"Just passing through. Listen, this is Sunday, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Is there a later worship service I could attend?"

"Yes."

"What time is that one?"

"Eleven o'clock."

"Hold it. You just said it's eleven o'clock now."

"It is."

"It's eleven o'clock now and later?"

"Yes."

"What kind of place is this? If today is Sunday, what is tomorrow?"

"Sunday."

"And yesterday?"

"Sunday. It's always Sunday at eleven o'clock here."

"Where am I?"

"Oh, I thought you knew. This is New Jerusalem."

Jerusalem has been new several times already. Modern Jerusalem is a city built on a city, built on a city. When King David captured it from

the Jebusites, there was a new Jerusalem. When Solomon built the first temple there, Jerusalem was a new place. After the Babylonian captivity, when the temple was rebuilt under the leadership of Ezra, Jerusalem became a new city. Jerusalem was eventually rebuilt after Romans sacked and burned it in 70 A.D. Today one wall of the second temple stands—the wailing wall—but there is no temple in the city. There is a beautiful mosque, the Dome of the Rock. There are synagogues and churches. But there is no Jerusalem Temple.

Then there is John's heavenly vision of the New Jerusalem beyond history: magnificently built, perfectly maintained, completely clean of all defilement. In New Jerusalem there is neither sun nor moon, for God is that city's supernal light. And there is no need for a temple in the city, for the worship of God proceeds in every quarter at every hour—as if it were always Sunday at eleven o'clock.

Long years ago Jeremiah warned his people against reliance on the permanence and protection of the temple. Hear him in the

Book of Jeremiah 7:3-4: Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel. Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord."

Within a generation the Jerusalem temple lay in ruins, and the pious Jews who had worshiped there were scattered all over the Babylonian Empire. Where now was the God who dwelled in the temple, in the holy of holies, the inner sanctuary, whose mercy seat was just above the ark of the covenant? What becomes of God when the house of God is destroyed? Could God travel with God's people? Did El Shaddai, God Almighty, have dominion beyond the borders of Israel? "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" they wailed.

Many of us venerate the Salem sanctuary, and we are doing our level best to preserve, maintain, and improve it, as we prepare for the celebration of the 150th anniversary of its erection next year.

What would happen to our faith if a natural disaster befell the structure—a tornado, say, or a ravaging fire? We would likely rebuild on this exact spot immediately, and I doubt we would have much trouble raising the money to do it. What with the insurance pay-out and member contributions, a new temple would be built nearly debt-free.

But what if some unkind Providence decreed that we could never again worship at this location? Would this congregation stay together? Some people I've talked to don't think so, so tied is our identity to this place. Do we have an identity apart from or beyond this building and this location? What are the ties that bind us? Those who love this edifice more than God would sooner say goodbye to some of us than to leave this temple.

In the mid-1960s when I was in seminary there was a house church movement initiated by those who believed that centralized worship was passe' and that our temples were dinosaurs. That notion persists. The theme of this year's Eden Seminary Spring Convocation

was "Church Buildings: Blessing or Burden?" There are those whose aim is to put space in the place of buildings. The church is not the building; it's people, they say. The congregation should not be tied to one location. It needs flexibility and adaptability. The church needs to stay loose and travel light.

One of our largest and most creative local United Methodist congregations is The Gathering. It now worships at four locations. It started in the old Immanuel UMC on McCausland Blvd. Its newest location is also on McCausland, just south of Manchester—in a recently built modern structure that looks like anything BUT a church.

The second location was in the old Clayton UMC at Bemiston and Maryland. They gutted the building and beautifully rehabbed it. The third location is at the Webster Groves city limits on Rockhill Rd. in Steger Elementary School, where our daughter Sara spent her sixth grade year. Every Saturday a volunteer crew trucks in light and sound equipment, setting up for Sunday worship. After worship all the equipment is

dismantled and trucked away to be stored for the week. On Monday morning Steger becomes a school again.

We love this traditional worship place, for place can be sacred space. There are memories that are attached to this place that are priceless. Here we have baptized our babies, married our sons and daughters, and laid to rest our loved ones. Such attachments are not easily broken or laid aside.

In the town square where the temple has stood for a century or two, there was never any doubt about where our center was. The church spire pointed us to God; the cross atop it reminded us of faith at the crossroads; and the clock in the tower told us what time it was. Then we knew that all our days and hours belonged to God.

No more! The temples are still there, but the people aren't, and many of the temples are going to wrack and ruin. When all these temples are reduced to dust, will God still be our light and our salvation, as Psalm 27

declares? When there is no temple in the city, will God yet be our dwelling place, as Psalm 90 suggests?

Part of our agony over the loss of the temple as center is that increasingly our lives seem to have no center. We move from one thing to the next. We are driven by time, driven by our schedules, driven by our desire to learn how to be God's people on the move. Our yearning is expressed by Malcolm Boyd's now famous prayer. "I've got to run. Are you running with me, Jesus?"

Some time ago, I spoke with a young woman who travels internationally for her corporation. That week she had been to Tokyo, Hong Kong, and one other foreign city I can't remember. In addition, she covers duties as wife, mother, and faithful church member. "It's a great job," she said, "and I love it; but I'm wearing golden handcuffs that I can't get off." She can't come to the temple very often. How can the church move with her?

Holy places are important. THIS holy place is

important, but not ultimate. We believe more in holy people than in holy places. That's been true for Christians ever since Jesus. Referring to his death and resurrection and to the destruction of the temple, which in a couple of generations would be razed, until not one stone sat upon another, Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and I'll rebuild it in three days." In a strange way, his body has become for us God's temple. And so are our bodies temples of God, insists the Apostle Paul. And we are Christ's body, he further asserts.

I Peter 2:4-5 says we are to "come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious, and like living stones be (ourselves) built into a spiritual house," a holy temple where the indwelling Spirit of the eternal God abides.

"And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb." Let us so live, then, that the worship of God may proceed in this city, temple or no temple, in every quarter at every hour—as if it were always Sunday at eleven o'clock!