

Sermon for the First Sunday after Christmas December 29, 2024 jj
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Our Lord Jesus Christ, whose name means, “The Lord Saves,” was presented in the temple in Jerusalem while He Himself was a helpless infant. He was brought to a place of prayer for people of all nations, as Isaiah called it, but it was also a place of sacrificial death, burning flesh, incense, offerings for sin, and significantly, the temple was a place of separation. Yes, the temple had rules—God’s rules—that kept some people out while letting other people in. Mary herself, the Mother of God, mind you, was forbidden to enter the outdoor temple courts until her Son had reached 40 days from birth. Then, before she could approach any closer, she was commanded by the law to make an offering of purification for herself and her Child. Armed with the holiness code of laws from the Old Testament, the temple divided men from women, Jews from Gentiles, and priests from laity.

The temple in which our Lord Jesus was presented was not the same building upon which He descended in the form of a cloud long ago in the days of King Solomon. That first temple was destroyed when the people of Jerusalem and Judah were forced into exile. Seventy years after that, a smaller and less-ornate building was built upon the ruins. This massive temple complex where Mary and Joseph are seen performing their ceremonial rites was wicked King Herod’s ongoing remodeling project. Despite all the sacrilege, Roman occupation, and Herod’s political intrigue with the priestly factions, God still sanctified this as His holy place. The blood of animals was spilled in place of men’s. The unmistakable burning-flesh aroma was pleasing to God not for it’s own sake but solely because of His promise of a coming Savior. He chose to dwell there on behalf of His people, and for their benefit. And despite the massive stone work and beams of cedar from Lebanon, this

was no more a permanent dwelling place than the roving tent that was pitched starting at the time of Moses and the Exodus.

Don’t forget that this once-impressive building, in the shadow of which Our Lord was presented and placed into Simeon’s arms, where at 12 years old He taught the teachers, and later on He preached and healed and overturned money-changer tables, this man-made structure would not last. In 70 A.D. it was destroyed by the Roman army, so it has been gone for 1954 years now. A legalistic religion as empty and false as the modern version of Judaism may call it a sacred place; the Islamic zealots claim to defend that same location by killing and maiming on behalf of their wicked, ugly god. And even if a temple like Herod’s should ever be rebuilt on that site, it doesn’t matter. God is not going to dwell there again. The temple’s purpose came to an end. Instead, God has raised up for Himself a Temple which men did not build, yet men did at one time tear down on the cross. However, the Lord rebuilt His Temple on the third day when He rose from the dead, and from that point onward we now have the years of our Lord, Anno Domini, A.D. counting back to when the Son of God began to live in our human flesh.

One of the many things that this Gospel teaches us is that now we no longer need a temple building like that of Solomon or Herod. We have the greater temple, because we have Jesus. Even if we should ever lose this precious structure that gives us protection from the outside elements, this modest edifice that supports our song of praise and directs our gaze toward heavenly things, we will nevertheless retain the greatest treasure, and most ancient dwelling-place of God right here in our midst. We have what goes back even before Adam and Eve were given the first garments of skin

following their grievous fall. And it will last longer, too.

All those other buildings and structures of past and present, they are only shadows of Him who remains here among us in His Word, in the flesh. They find their fulfillment in the One who died, but now lives, the real Temple that was torn down, but rebuilt in three days. Jesus is the place of God's gracious presence. He is Immanuel, God with Us, God as one of us, God for us. He is the Atonement sacrifice, the appeasement of God's righteous anger (that's called propitiation) and the Passover Lamb that takes away the sins of the whole world, instead of just those households with the blood on their doorpost. His precious Blood is sprinkled upon us, poured from the cup in the Lord's Supper, and it gives us faith, makes us clean, calls us His own in the one, true faith. Christ stands between us and God's perfect Law. He is the seat of mercy, the House of Prayer for all people, the great high priest who intercedes to the Father for the sake of His Church even while at the same time He teaches us to pray to Him ourselves.

He is greater than all those buildings, types, symbols and foreshadowings that went before Him. And unlike the Old Testament temple, Jesus does not segregate among His disciples. In Him, St. Paul says, unlike in the man-built temple, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male nor female. In Him there are no more laymen. All believers are priests of the order of Melchizedek, Christ's own priestly order. We'll still have our different callings and distinctions, but because of Jesus, now our access to God is all the same. All who confess His Name are members of the royal family, too. As priests you offer up the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, and in response to your prayers He spares the world of even greater evil than it already suffers. Jesus the true temple is not bound to time or space or real estate, yet He willingly and permanently joined Himself to the skin and bone that began to grow in Mary's womb, so

that He might die and rise again to forgive your sins.

That temporary time of humiliation is also ended, but Jesus the temple is not destroyed. He is risen, glorified, still a fully human being, still Mary's Son and our Brother, only now He's sitting at the right hand of the Father in absolute power, fully using all Divine rights and attributes, like omnipresence and omniscience. As a Man, He dwells in the hearts of His believers, making you His temple of the Holy Spirit where His own loving Father is addressed by grace as Our Father. As a Man, in our flesh, He is here in bread and wine to join us to Him in a union that defies our scientific intellect but satisfies and feeds our faith.

This is the temple where God has called you to be: where He is, where He has promised that He would be for you. That doesn't mean that in the Divine liturgy of Word and Sacrament, where He is right now, it will always be a gushing, emotional high or a brain-thawing revelation of His Grace. Sure, He will give those times every now and then. When they do, we can give thanks and be glad. When the disasters and bad days come, He's there too, as He said. Twelve years ago a brother Pastor of mine in Kansas City gave a clear testimony to that when he was interviewed on the news after a fire around Christmas time destroyed a portion of his church building. Ours is the life of faith, not sight or personal experience. Living by faith means believing in the Word and His promises above all else, even when we feel cold and dead inside. When our soul seems lost in a foggy, make-believe world, when we're anxious and full of self-pity, and even when our only emotion is lackadaisical melancholy, even then we live by faith, we trust God's Word. Faith says, "Yes, I hurt. Yes, I am sad. But let God be true and every man a liar. I'll believe in Him! No matter what, I know that God is good, everything He promises will happen, and that my Savior is here for me just as He said He

would be. I'll believe in that!" So goes God's grace, so goes our faith.

Dear friends, this is what the birth and death and resurrection of Christ our Lord was meant for: your eternal peace. Time will always come to an end, even as the hours run out on the year 2024. So too will your sorrows and pain soon be over. Christ the temple lives. He is here, and He will return again in glory to set things right on His judgment throne. Now while we wait, while the spiritual pain tries our patience sometimes, He is here for you in the places where He has promised to be. It is that perfect torn-down and built-again temple of His Body and Blood that is fed to you this morning, so that you yourself would become what He is, a temple of His gracious presence, His own Beloved in whom the Father is well-pleased, the home of His Holy Spirit, a temple not built with hands, a royal priest, a living, breathing house of prayer. Christ, the Firstborn of Mary, is presented before you in Word and Sacrament today, even as He was presented in the sight of Simeon and Anna in the temple built by hands so long ago.

And so you sing together with Simeon, Lord, now You let thy servant depart in peace.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.