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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

July 20, 2024

Proper 11, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[2 Samuel 7:1-14a](#)

[Psalms 89:20-37](#)

[Ephesians 2:11-22](#)

[Mark 6:30-34, 53-56](#)

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Poor David. He really wanted to build a house for God.

Here he has his kingdom. Years of wandering and conquest, and the Israelites have become a mighty people. They have their own land and a king to be reckoned with. And this whole time the ark of the covenant, the sign of God's presence, has been accompanying them in a tabernacle, a portable tent shrine. A pilgrim God for a pilgrim people. But now David has a palace, and he starts to feel the oddness of having a nicer place than God. And of course, just maybe, in his heart of hearts, he has an eye on his own legacy. Who wouldn't want to be remembered for building God's house? Maybe with a nice tasteful plaque identifying him as the one who built it. So he floats the idea, and at first the prophet Nathan is on board, but then God speaks with a different plan.

Did you hear the wordplay in what God says back to David? “Are you the one to build me a house? . . . I say that *I* will build *you* a house.” God promises to bless David’s line of descendants, the house of David. David’s not going to build God a house made of wood and stone; God’s going to build David a house made of people.

Now it does happen that David’s son King Solomon eventually builds God a temple. We’ll going to hear that story in a few weeks, in August. And that temple endures for hundreds of years, then is destroyed when the Babylonians send Israel into exile. It’s rebuilt after the exile, and this second temple lasts several more centuries, but it’s then destroyed again permanently under the Romans in a terrible war.

It’s just a generation or so before that war that Jesus appears: a prophet and teacher and perhaps something more. His followers understand him to be descended from David by birth—he’s part of that house made of people. And Jesus has a relationship, too, with that house of wood and stone. He worships in the temple; he cares about it; he speaks of it being a house of prayer for all nations. Yet he also has a habit of speaking of a different kind of temple. He foretells a time when the Jerusalem temple will be destroyed—indeed the gathering clouds of conflict with Rome are already on the horizon—but speaks of raising up a new temple made of his own body.

After his execution and resurrection, his followers experience themselves as part of that body, grafted into Jesus' own self through baptism. They speak of his death as something that breaks down the kinds of barriers that exist in physical buildings to separate people. Our epistle to the Ephesians today says that Jesus has broken down the wall that stood in the Temple courtyard to keep Gentiles out. And the gospel stories write about Jesus' death as tearing the very curtain of the Holy of Holies, so that the most sacred place in the world—the place built for the ark, the place where God's presence dwells—is laid open to everyone. And our epistle goes on to continue speaking of a new temple made of Jesus' body—the same body we as Christians have been grafted into—so that Jesus himself is the cornerstone, the apostles and prophets are the foundation, and every member is part of the building. “In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

So again we've moved from a temple made of wood and stone, to a temple made of people.

It seems God really likes to live in people.

We build buildings for God. We designate holy places where God is to be remembered. And those places are good, in and of themselves. But God has a habit of not staying put there. It seems God likes to break down walls, tear open curtains, and go out on the move to wander with a pilgrim people. So if we want to follow God, that means we need to be a church on the move, a church made of people.

In our gospel reading, Jesus and his disciples are on their way to a quiet place to rest. Yet when they get there, they find the whole region turned out to hear Jesus preach. Often, when we might be expecting to find God in a momentary escape from the world, we discover instead that it's right in the middle of the world that God lives.

That has implications for us at Incarnation. On the narrow end, it shapes our goals for our own congregation in the months and years to come. We just completed a generational plan for our campus, which is great. And in the next year or two we will probably be doing some work on our buildings and grounds. But as we do that work, we need to remember that God values not temples made with human hands but temples built out of people. If we do some renovations of the sacred spaces on this campus—and I think we will and we should—we need to do it not because we think God needs it, or worse yet so we can sit around and enjoy it for ourselves, but so we can gather more and more people into God's hospitality, so we can feed those who are hungry for physical and spiritual food, so this place can truly be more and more a house of prayer for all people.

So this vision of a temple built out of people matters for us and our little plans for this one congregation. But I think it also matters way beyond that, for our world. We live in a moment where so many norms and institutions are shifting or even crumbling. Political institutions, international institutions, cultural institutions, religious institutions. We live in a time when a lot of temples are falling—some of them temples we might dearly love, some of them temples we might even have worked hard to help build.

And we also live in a time when walls of hostility are being set up all around us; when voices of hatred, division, and exclusion are getting louder; when violence is becoming increasingly normalized in our political life, as we saw so horrifyingly last weekend in the attempted assassination of former President Trump; when civic life is couched in terms of us and them, good and bad, winners and losers.

I don't know what headlines and crises the next weeks and months will bring. I do know that as followers of Jesus we are in the people-building business. I believe if we are truly a community of practice that shapes people in the image of Christ through our baptismal covenant then the world around us will be changed for the better. And I know we as the church have a message the world of sheep without a shepherd around us deeply needs to hear. It's a message of a God for whom there are no outcasts who is building a temple where walls of hostility are torn down, where we are not winners and losers against one another but members of one another, where there is no such thing as a triumph for one that is a loss for another, where no member can possibly be left behind. That God is building a temple out of living stones that will never be destroyed.