

Scripture: John 2:13-22

Sermon Title: Under Construction

In our scripture today, we find some interesting images of the Jerusalem Temple during the time of Jesus. This specific Temple had been “under construction” for forty-six (46) years. For our own time, that would be at least two (2) generations, if not more. What if, for instance, our church building had been under construction since 1978 to the present day. This is a long time to be working on a Temple. And people were trying to use the Temple despite the construction and repair. The Temple was a place of business in addition to a place of worship; as Jesus said, some had created a marketplace out of God’s house (John 2:16.) In some ways, we can understand this alignment of business and faith. It takes money to keep up repairs and construction; to keep up a place of worship so that it can continually be used. In the time of Jesus, a Temple Tax was due just prior to the Passover every year (Matt. 17:24), from every Israelite who was twenty years old or older (Ex. 30:11-16). It was half a shekel or about two Greek drachmas, roughly two days wages, or about 19 cents each, about 62 grains of barley. The only problem here was that the tax had to be paid in Jewish coin and not Roman coin. Roman and Greek coinage were not acceptable in the Temple because of the imperial and pagan portraits on those coins. So, those worshippers attending the Festival of the Passover, would have to exchange their Roman currency for Hebrew currency in the Temple. This meant profits for the money changers and convenience for those traveling long distances to attend the festival. Also, thanks to Caiaphas, stalls were built inside the Temple precincts to take care of animals; worshippers could buy the necessary sacrificial animals at the temple rather than bringing them on their journey. Cattle, sheep, turtle doves, etc. could be purchased locally for the required sacrifice in the Temple.

The first Temple had been built on the famous Rock Moriah, a foundation stone for what is called today the Dome of the Rock, a holy site for both Judaism and Islam. King David had spent 50 silver shekels for this location, previously known as the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, in gratitude for the mercy of God in stopping the plague here in this place. It is on this site that King Solomon built the first Temple of God, in the city of Jerusalem, using, in part, wood from the famous cedars of Lebanon, with lavish amounts of gold inlay. The Temple faced east toward where the sun often rises over the Mount of Olives, only about 200 feet lower in elevation than the Mount of Olives. Psalm 84 is known as the Temple Psalm and portrays in words the magnificence of the Temple. The original dream for the Temple was that it would be a “house to honor the name of the Lord.” (1 Kgs. 8:17); a copy and a shadow of the “true tent” which is in the heavens and in our hearts. (Heb. 8:5; Acts 7:44). The prophet Zephaniah declares what God will do: “I will make you a name and a praise.” God will make a home in our hearts to honor the holy name!

When King David praises the generosity of the people who built the Temple, he speaks a prayer from his heart:

“O God, keep this generous spirit alive forever, even the framing (*yatsar*) of the thoughts of the

heart in these, your people, and direct their hearts toward you.” (1 Chron. 29:18)

The first Temple was destroyed by the Babylonian army under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar and is rebuilt by Zerubbabel upon the return of the people from Babylonian captivity. Known at that time as the second Temple, the book of Ezra tells us that the people wept because it paled in comparison to the previous Temple. During the time just prior to the birth of Jesus, King Herod tries to restore the magnificence of the first temple in order to gain favor with the people. However, he does not tear it completely down to start over, but instead tries to repair and improve the existing Temple while it is in use. Herod employs about 18,000 workers to complete the project, the Temple having been under repair for some 46 years when Jesus reaches thirty years of age. Do you remember what the disciples have to say to Jesus upon first seeing the Temple? It is recorded in Mark 13:1, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” And so, in today’s scripture, those who have watched the cleansing of the Temple by Jesus, respond with the words: “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” They obviously did not understand what Jesus was saying; “Destroy this temple, and in three days, I will raise it up.” It is almost as if there are two conversations going on at the same time. Do you also get that feeling?

Then, Jesus uttered those hauntingly familiar words” which seem to predict the destroying of the beautiful Temple to God that has taken so long to be restored at such great expense! You know the words. The words for which the chief priests of the Temple try to hold him accountable after arresting him in Gethsemane. Only Mark has a slightly different set of words: “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days, I will build another, not made with hands.” (Mark 14:58) But none of his accusers could actually get a consistent testimony on what Jesus had actually said about the Temple or the synagogues. They all failed to get the point of the conversation! And suddenly, somewhere along the way, someone remembers that Jesus was talking about the Temple of His own body, not about the great Jerusalem Temple, or the second Temple, for that matter, that would be destroyed again in 70 CE by the Romans. Paul even uses this image in his writings: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple, and that God’s spirit dwells in you? ... For God’s temple is holy and that temple you are.” (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Do you suppose Paul knew something that we do not, something about what Jesus actually said on the day he cleansed the temple of the moneychangers?

Jesus actually clears out the precincts surrounding the central sanctuary of the Temple, most likely in the Court of the Gentiles. This is the “*Hiero*” of the Temple. The Court of the Gentiles had become so cluttered with moneychangers and their tables, that it was no longer possible for anyone to worship there—foreigners, gentiles, had been gradually pushed out until there was no place for them [ tabernae, הַבַּיִת – animals, incense, oil, wine, etc.]. The whole process of exchange had evolved to a “convenience of worship,” and no longer about the sacrifice of the best of the herd, the first born, the first fruits or the first harvest. So, a cleaning was necessary. If you were there that day, some, such as Peter of Riga, suggest that you might have seen “terrifying rays coming out of his eyes.” The so-called “terrifying whip” may have been a small,

short cord that was used to tie up the animals to keep them from wandering. Was this angry action the reason he was arrested and put to death?

But, in the conversation about the Temple today, Jesus is referring to the “*Naon*,” which is the central sanctuary of the Temple, the place that the priests entered only once during the year, during Yom Kippur, the place Leviticus tells us that one cannot come near, if you have a handicap or a blemish, if you are blind or lame, or have a limb too long, an injured foot or an injured hand (Leviticus 21:18-23), the place where John the Baptist’s father was struck mute, and where the curtain separating the Holy of Holies was torn completely down the middle, symbolizing in some strange way, access to forgiveness for everyone. Jesus is using a familiar set of words, in a bold new way. The heart of worship is that everyone is included! Gentile, Jew, slave, free, without regard for gender, those from all the various ends of the earth.

As I personally reflect on the scriptural theme for today, I find that I also carry a sometimes visible, sometimes invisible “Under Construction” sign on my person or in my personality. Do you sometimes have the same reflection for yourself? We might say, that “God is not finished with me yet,” or “I am not ready for prime-time yet.” This is the kind of construction that no amount of education or training can remedy. Our sign might say: “we are on-pause, or on-hold, our life bracketed until further notice. The slow and steady work of “repair” is in progress.

I have felt a fear and frustration whenever, in the past, I have had to walk across a city street to avoid downtown buildings that were under construction, or to evade the wooden sidewalks provided for pedestrians to get past the construction. These construction sites seemed to never go away. In some cases, the owners might want to keep the remodeling secret until opening day. No peeking. No disrupting. “Pardon our dust, our mess!” The sign asks us to suspect criticism and tolerate annoyance. The sign gives us permission to change! To experiment. Be curious. Try new things. Some will want the sign to remain awhile because it brings comfort. No change before its time. I don’t want to step into the transforming waters of Bethesda. I don’t want to see the change yet! Others will want the sign to go away as soon as possible. Let’s get the job done and move on! Let’s celebrate the good anxiety which urges us on to change. Displacement is uncomfortable; homelessness feels like bad news, not good news. Looking back on the wooden sidewalks, I was consumed with impatience for when all the construction would go away. Paulo Coelho suggests that it is not the speed of change that is important, but the direction of change. In many churches today, there is the consuming sense that members do not stay long, that their mission has evolved and now the mission is to provide a temporary home for the chronically displaced. In these churches, there is a lingering sense of obscurity and loss; a challenge not to be consumed by our fears.

When we think of the three days that Jesus predicts will be the time needed to restore the Temple, we might parallel each of those days with the notions of change, transition and

transformation. Theologically, it parallels Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter. Biblically, we might also think of Exodus, Wilderness and Promised Land. Holy Saturday, Day Two, is often equated with the “Dark Night of the Soul,” a phrase used in a poem by St. John of the Cross in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and taken from an anonymous work from the 14<sup>th</sup> century called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In this Day Two experience, we struggle spiritually with a sense of obscurity and loss, with a sense of grief that comes about because of our transition to something better. In like manner, the wilderness experience of the First Testament is a struggle with the forces of drivenness, how to break out of rhythms of empire into the rhythms of grace, out of the rhythms of slavery into the rhythms of freedom. It is a fight against being consumed by loss or being consumed by zeal.

In Austin, or Fort Worth, or Dallas, Texas, when I would drive past a major highway interchange, I would note the many ramps that were partially constructed for future highways—ramps that went to nowhere, dangling out in space as if to say: “for future use.” Yes, I understood the cost-savings, but in my memory, these ramps seemed to remain around forever, their original beauty long gone, their future functionality long forgotten. And I wondered: “Had zeal consumed the extravagant dreams of Texas highway engineers and planners?” Zeal almost always works in reverse. It alienates, estranges, separates. It consumes. Part of the gospel message is to say ‘no’ to disconnection, isolation, and loneliness; to say yes to connection and community. Kathleen O’Connor suggests that disconnection is a tool of empire that tears down our bodies and spirits, shrinks our boundaries, and leads us into foreclosed futures. Connection, on the other hand, is a tool of the church to build up resilience through love. As the television advertisement tells us: “when we feed others, futures are nourished.” What does Jesus say to Peter about love, about loss, about change: “Feed my sheep, Tend my lambs.”

The Zen Masters say: “Do not lose yourself in consumption? Consume in a way that preserves peace, joy and well-being (Thich Nhat Hanh). Don’t work yourself until you’re drained and empty. Save back a part of yourself for tomorrow. Our lives should not be centered in fatigue, but in readiness; not in weariness but in renewed energy; not in boredom but in excitement. When you are weary, don’t let the weariness into your heart. Rest up, don’t rest down. Rest from your labor at the appropriate times, so you can greet the world with grace after the resting. “The Sabbath belongs to us; we do not belong to the Sabbath.” Likewise, “change belongs to us; we do not belong to change.” The Sabbath includes the strangers in our midst; our day of rest belongs to all of us and not just a few of us; Both rest and change are God’s gift to us. In Paul’s Letter to Philemon, he writes:

"Refresh your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

The Greek word for “refresh” is “anapepautai” which can loosely be translated “rest up,” or “refresh.” The prefix to the word carries the sense of “up” rather than “down.” “Rest Up”. This

type of resting is an intentional act of self-restraint, to stop, to pause, so that you can later return with intensity. When the First Testament uses the phrase: “enter into God’s rest,” it implies that we must stop our quarrelsome and complaining ways and look for the “new” and the “unexpected,” the manna rather than the full-course meal. We still have much to do and rest is important to our overall success. In the Genesis story, work is a noun and rest is a verb. When God rests after creation, God is resting up and not resting down.

In downtown Austin, we had a famous landmark in the technology world, called affectionately as the Intel Building. It stood uncompleted for years and years, a monument to the bursting of what we called in the 2000s, the tech bubble; the partial building was finally torn down to make way for a new building. But, not before this half-completed modern skyscraper stood for the longest time, as a very visible reminder of the waste of extravagance, a building literally “under construction,” yet without any progress being made at all. Zeal had consumed; the bubble had burst! The eternal pause in construction caused great disappointment! The warning symbol for us is this: “do not let change consume you!” You and I are worth infinitely more than the change around us, or the change we desire to see. It is NOT about competition or about the administrative business of the church. It is about who we are together in love that counts. “To God you belong,” says Paul. Together you are the embodied construction of God. You are the field! You are the building! You belong to Christ and through Christ you belong to God (v.23).

I would share words from a movie called *Magorium’s Magic Emporium*. One of the stars in the movie is Natalie Portman who plays the role of “Mahoney”, a young and rising musician who is stuck on one of the songs she is composing and unable to move forward and complete the song. She goes over it and over it again and again and continues to get stuck at the same place in the song. She is completely frustrated by it all, but as she works in the emporium, day by day, she begins to get more confidence. The narrator of the movie says that ‘she must learn to believe that she is more than what she believes.’ Her quest for adulthood has begun to take its toll on her imagination. Magorium tells her at one point in the movie: ‘Your life is an occasion. Rise to it.’ We are more than the change we seek! Believe beyond belief! Amen.