



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 22, 2022
ACTS 16:9-15, PSALM 67, REVELATION 21:10, 22-22:5, JOHN 5:1-9

DRASH FOR SAINT MARK'S

Revelation 21:22 -22:5 *I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day— and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever*

Good morning, and God bless all of you on this day of reflection, prayer, and community. It is a distinct honor and pleasure to speak to you from this iconic pulpit in this historic church. Even more so, to share this space with Dean Thomason, a dear friend and eminent colleague, and to be amidst a congregation that has forged deep and abiding bonds with Temple De Hirsch Sinai going back many decades. I particularly have fond memories of a leadership trip our congregations shared 16 years ago, as we visited sites and spoke to leaders in Israel and the West Bank.

I so cherish the partnership that Dean Thomason, Father Ryan of St. James Cathedral, and I have nurtured both personally, and as leaders responding to the emerging needs of our wider region. I joke that our three houses of worship are the 3 cathedrals on Capital Hill, though using that phrasing of Temple as a cathedral has drawn some groans from my more traditional co-religionists.

In looking at the lectionary readings for this morning, with their emphasis on New Testament texts as opposed to our shared

reliance upon the Hebrew Scriptures, I found myself at a crossroads. I am pulled between my humble reticence to speak to words that do not come out of my faith tradition, and my zeal to bring a Jewish lens to Christian texts that were essentially written by Jews, for a Jewish audience, in a Jewish style—albeit for a very different intent and outcome.

And so, I beg your indulgence and understanding, if not your openness to looking at familiar texts through fresh eyes.

I was intrigued by the reading of Chapter 21 and 22 of The Book of Revelation. Now, for a Jewish lover of apocalyptic films, from Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* through the *Exorcist* up to recent end times epics, Revelation carries with it a bit of a sci-fi and thriller vibe. Fictionally, it was exciting that an ancient text can foresee the end of the world, as archaic metaphors seem to reveal the modern means of our self-inflicted demise.

More seriously, I studied some New Testament in rabbinic school, equipping myself to interact in an informed way with the majority faith communities of this nation. I learned that Revelation was essentially a midrash—a scriptural interpretation of events to make them relevant to a contemporary audience.

In essence, Revelation is less about the end of the world and more a veiled critique of the Roman empire—a vicious enemy of both Christians and Jews. This was an important moment in our shared history, as Jews sought to rescue Judaism after the cataclysmic destruction of the Second Temple, reconstituting it under the authority of the rabbis based on their understanding of Torah.

The text also reflects the arch polemic between rabbinic Judaism and the emerging church, as sibling faiths sought both to distinguish themselves from one another and to deflect the harsh focus of their Roman subjugators. And so, I don't take it personally when the author of this text talks about "those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." It's just the rough and tumble of a volatile, competitive time, though the real problems for my people arise when later generations take these kinds of statements to heart, out of historic context, as justification for the persecution and annihilation of Jewish communities.

Anyway...I'd like to focus on Revelation Chapter 21 verse 22, as John describes the heavenly New Jerusalem he envisions: "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb." So, what does John mean us to take from this stark observation, a blending of

worldly geo-politics with a prophetic vision for a holy city rooted in predecessors like Ezekiel.

Is it a critique of Temple-focused Judaism, seemingly vindicated by its destruction within recent memory? Or is it what is commonly assumed by Christian commentators: That Christ's death renders obsolete the practices and priestly provinces of the Temple sacrificial cult. In essence, Christianity is said to supersede and replace Judaism.

When I read this passage, with as generous, open-minded, and open-hearted interpretation that I can muster, I see an incisive critique of what we religious leaders call the "edifice complex"—a sense that the worth and status of a community is gauged by the size of its facilities.

This is a very complicated psycho-spiritual dynamic, and I know it's a bit ironic coming from the rabbi of a large, 2-campus facility speaking to a congregation sitting in an historic, awe-inspiring house of worship. And while Dean Thomason and I are both immersed in elements of a capital campaign directed toward necessary remodeling of aging structures, there are still important insights that inform this paradox with purpose and promise.

In the times when this text was written, Jews were, indeed, creating a Judaism that

could survive without the Temple—a necessary shift to ensure Jewish survival, and an intent very different from the Christians who were forging a new faith that they believed transcended the need for ritual sacrifice.

And there has always been a strange reciprocity of values between our faiths on the whole notion of worship sites. Christians often built grandiose structures with an eye toward creating their own version of the Jerusalem Temple. In other words, if Jews had their Temple, then we will build churches that will surpass its grandeur and become the true successor of the Temple. And to ensure this outcome, the laws of the Christian and Moslem lands in which we lived required that our places of worship be humble, lowly, and mundane.

Ironically, many American Jews, particularly in the Reform Movement of Judaism, wanting to express their reverence for their faiths as equal to their Christian fellow citizens, also began to build large Temples—note the well-chosen word—in a bizarre bringing to full circle of this arms race over sacred space.

But there is a text and a concept in Torah that seeks to balance the very real human need for a concrete locus of worship that feels equal to the depth and brilliance of faith, while cherishing the realization that matters of the spirit should not require a

brick and mortar expression of ego, pride, and earthly pursuits.

In the Book of Exodus, the Israelites are executing God's command to build the Mishkan—the desert Tabernacle that was predecessor to the permanent Temple in Jerusalem. Amidst a list of instructions and materials that feels like an obsessive-compulsive episode on the HGTV network, we read this passage at the start of the construction: "*V'asu li mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham*—Let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell amongst or within them."

Commentators offered many interpretive insights on this text. But chief amongst them is a sense that God understands human nature, but still inspires us to rise above our material, earthly needs to embrace a higher purpose. People need a tangible focus for their gathering, their connection, and their communal worship. However, we should not get too caught up in the walls, carpets, and dedicatory plaques. Rather, we should see them as a means to an end to something bigger and more enduring.

And when you think about it, does God really need a place to dwell? As I share with my younger students, if God wanted to meet us in the QFC parking lot, is anything too great for God? God is everywhere and can meet us in any place. WE need the spiritual magnifying glass of faith within a

place of worship to concentrate our intentions and efforts out of the limited tools of vision and imagination that we possess as human beings.

In essence, the process of building the Temple, synagogue, or church is more critical than the product. Or as is often shared as pithy axiom: The journey is more important than the destination.

When we come together to build something physical, we forge bonds of friendship and mutual obligation, thus welcoming the Shechinah--God's dwelling presence into our hearts and into our midst. The buildings and structures, while important, are but a pathway toward bringing about God's vision for this world through the works of our hands and the will of our hearts.

May the love, respect, and care that we feel on this day of interreligious gathering and learning forge foundations of trust and faith that are far sturdier than the mightiest pillars, far more enduring than the timeless stones of antiquity, lifting all of us to a better, brighter future worthy of God's grace and our blessed possibilities. Amen.