

Upper Path Valley Presbyterian Church
2020: The Global Year of the Bible
The Sixth Sunday of Easter
The Ninth Sunday of Quarantine from COVID-19

May 17, 2020

A Lamp and a Light, Part 18
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Last week, using Scriptures from Psalm 139, John 14, and Genesis 1, I preached about the importance of our relationships as those who are made in the image of a God who is in himself, the example of perfect relationship: Father, Son, & Holy Spirit. You just heard Jen & Bill Harris share their hearts about what they miss about not gathering together on Sunday mornings. They miss the relationships they have built with others over the years. Relationships with other parents of school-age children so they can help & encourage each other in the raising of their children to know & love the Lord, relationships with singles around them, seniors around them, relationships with friends of their kids, relationships with new friends who have found a home in our church family. Jen & Bill's words reflect the heart of many people in our congregation, younger and older, and the heart of many church family members all over the world. We miss each other! The church is not a building. The church is the people, and when the people can't gather, even though we have the Lord with and within us wherever we go, we miss our people! We were made to be with our people! And that's what I want to preach about today. Let's pray:

Holy Spirit, Living Breath of God, come. Remove the blinders from our eyes, the plugs from our ears, and the shields that WE have placed around our hearts. Breathe new life into willing souls. Renew our hearts and make us whole, and wholly yours, as we hear your words of life and truth. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

This past week in our daily Bible readings that many in our congregation are doing together (and I just love that God led us to do this together, because even though we are apart, it is very sweet to think that many of us are reading the same words from God each day together), King David died. He had ruled over Israel for 40 years, and now his son Solomon takes over as king. If you remember, King David really, really wanted to build a temple for God, a glorious house for God, but God said 'no.' In 2nd Samuel 7, we read the story. For most of the 40 years that the Israelite people were making the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, they had put up and taken down the magnificent tent called the Tabernacle, (and we are not talking the kind of tent you use for camping, or you use for parties, or picnics. We're not talking a pop-up. Oh, how the Israelites would have loved having a pop-up). The Tabernacle was elaborate. The instructions for it were given by God and carried out faithfully by God's people. It was the dwelling place for God himself as he led his people out of slavery to a place of freedom.

King David loved God, and he wanted to build him a permanent, beautiful dwelling place. Nothing wrong with that desire... but it wasn't his to do. Has that ever happened to you? You had something you really wanted to do for the Lord, but it never came to pass? Maybe you tried and it flopped. Maybe you just put some feelers out there, and it just never got traction. Anyone know what I'm talking about? I could tell you story after story of ministry ideas I've had, and I tried to get going, but they went nowhere fast. Listen, if the Lord's not in it, no fruit will come from it. If the Lord doesn't build the house, the workers labor in vain. That Temple was not David's to build.

King David's son Solomon was called to build the Temple for God. Instructions, clear to every last detail, were given by God. It took seven years to build the Temple with incredible craftsmanship. Bronze, gold, olive wood, gold, cypress wood, gold, cedar paneling, gold, fine linen decorated with blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and did I say gold? I suggest you read

about the ornate, elaborate, glorious details in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles. It blows your mind the elegant detail God gave for the Temple – this place where He would dwell.

When it was completed, the nation was assembled and the ark of the covenant was brought into the Temple. Like what happened with the tabernacle (that elaborate, moveable tent) the cloud descended on the Temple and the glory of the Lord filled the place (2 Chron. 5:11-14), *“All the priests who were present had purified themselves, whether or not they were on duty that day. ¹²And the Levites who were musicians—Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun, and all their sons and brothers—were dressed in fine linen robes and stood at the east side of the altar playing cymbals, lyres, and harps. They were joined by 120 priests who were playing trumpets. ¹³The trumpeters and singers performed together in unison to praise and give thanks to the Lord. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals, and other instruments, they raised their voices and praised the Lord with these words: “He is good! His faithful love endures forever!” At that moment a thick cloud filled the Temple of the Lord. ¹⁴The priests could not continue their service because of the cloud, for the glorious presence of the Lord filled the Temple of God.”*

Now, why is this important today? Why spend time thinking about a tent and a building that no longer exist? Let’s remember that the purpose of the all-important Tabernacle in the wilderness was to be God’s dwelling place, to be a place of worship, sacrifice, and prayer. Likewise, the purpose of that first Temple Solomon had built was primarily to be God’s dwelling place, and to be a place of worship, sacrifice, and prayer.

Listen to these words from the Gospel of John 1:14, *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* The writer, John, is obviously thinking about the tabernacle and the temple as he is introducing the Lord Jesus Christ to us. In fact, Greek scholars regularly note that the words translated ‘made his dwelling’ or ‘dwelt’ in other translations is the verb form of the word for “tabernacle.” Some go as far as to translate this verse, “The Word (meaning Jesus) became flesh and “tabernacled among us.” I think we could say also, ‘templed among us.” John wrote, “We have seen his glory...” reminding us of the glorious presence of the Lord that filled both the tabernacle and the temple when they were dedicated.

God’s presence with us changed from dwelling in places with walls, to dwelling in the person of Jesus Christ who was fully God and fully man both at the same time. From a tent, to a solid building, to within the earthly body of Christ – God’s presence with us has evolved. God’s presence with us has changed where it lodged. But there is more.

After Jesus’ crucifixion, burial, and resurrection, one of his faithful followers, Stephen, was put on trial. One of the charges against him was that he spoke against the temple. (You should read Acts 7, Stephen’s speech. It is amazing!) Here’s what he said in response: *“The Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands.”* Well that didn’t go over very well. As you might remember, Stephen was stoned to death for blasphemy. His final words, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

The New Testament letters from Paul to the followers of Jesus go on to teach us that the dwelling place of God is now the church, not the church building, but the people who make up the body of Christ. That’s you if you have put your faith in Jesus.

Listen to these words from the apostle Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus 2:19-22. I am reading from the Amplified Bible about a new spiritual kingdom right here on earth with earthly purpose for heavenly gain. The language, the analogy is back to a building with walls, but it’s only that, an analogy – so that we can see and understand. *“¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens [outsiders without rights of citizenship], but you are fellow citizens with the saints (God’s people), and are [members] of God’s household, ²⁰having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the [chief] Cornerstone, ²¹in whom the whole structure is joined together, and it continues [to increase] growing into a holy temple in the Lord [a sanctuary dedicated, set apart, and sacred to the presence of the Lord]. ²²In Him [and in fellowship with one another] you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”* 1 Corinthians 6:19 tells us, *“¹⁹Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?”*

We are all living, breathing temples for God. I am. You are. We are now the dwelling place of God. It doesn't make us God. It doesn't make us little junior gods. No. God's spirit dwelling in you and me makes us temples for God whose purpose is worship, sacrifice, and prayer. Whether we are together or apart doesn't change that. We sing that song, "Lord, prepare us to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true. With thanksgiving I'll be a living sanctuary for you." Whether we are in one place for worship, sacrifice, and prayer or not, we are still individually temples for God. Wherever we are. That's quite a calling - to be a vessel of the presence of God wherever you are.

So, why gather? Why have God's people gathered together, in Jesus' name, since the day of Pentecost if we are already temples for the Holy Spirit? Each individual believer is already a temple for the Holy Spirit. Can't we do our part, our individual parts of building this spiritual kingdom on earth for Heaven's gain, can't we do our part better - more effectively if we remain spread out over Huntingdon, Fulton, Franklin, Perry, and Cumberland Counties? That's a lot of temples out there for his glory, right?

Right! But God told us through the apostle Paul's writings in Ephesians 2:22 that *"In Him [and in fellowship with one another] you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit."* The Message puts it this way: *"Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day - a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home."*

We are important to the kingdom individually. Absolutely. Whether you are a baked potato, a chip, or a French fry - we are all important as temples of the Holy Spirit. But together, together people, we are a feast beyond feasts! When all the stones and bricks are in the same place for worship, sacrifice, and prayer - God's glory is manifest. God's glory is known. The beautiful heaviness of God's glory is felt as we sing together, as we pray together, as we listen to each other's stories, as we help and care for one another.... And let me tell you - God's glory is addicting - and it beats any other addiction that might be trying to get its claws into you in the middle of a pandemic!

As individual temples of the Holy Spirit, and at the same time, as individual bricks and stones of a greater temple, the Body of Christ, we long for the fellowship of our brothers and sisters in Christ. That's what Jen & Bill said. That's what they miss so much. It's not the building. It's the people. It's the connection we have because Christ is our cornerstone and Christ's work is magnified when we do it together. God's people were made to build his kingdom together. Together.

1 Peter 2:9,10 declare: *"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."*

May God be merciful and bring us back together again soon and very soon - and may he bring new believers, new friends, new brothers & sisters in Christ, new living bricks and stones to build with us the glorious kingdom of our God and our King, Jesus Christ, the Savior for all humankind. Amen.