

Building the House of God

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

Psalm 122

I went back to West Virginia last Sunday for the first time in a while. As I approached Charles Town and, I felt disoriented by the landscape. Entire housing developments had been erected in place of open fields. I'm not talking about a few houses, but entire neighborhoods filled with massive houses stacked next to each other covering acres and acres of land. It was shocking. My firefighter friend informed me that these new homes, although fast to build, burn down three times faster than older construction because of all the modern use of synthetic materials. Quickly assembled homes don't last as long either. Like so much about our modern age, contemporary people tend to value immediacy over durability. When it comes to the physical homes we build, sometimes the cost/benefit analysis proves a hastily and inexpensively assembled home is best. But, when it comes to the construction of our spiritual dwellings, there is no shortcut.

This morning's lessons from the Hebrew Bible refer to the **house** of God six different times. In the ancient imagination, the city of God surrounded God's **house**, which was the temple, the very dwelling place of God. Much of Old Testament literature was written before the temple was built, when the temporary tabernacle was the closest the people could get to God, or after the temple was destroyed and the people were longing for its comfort or hoping to one day return. The temple was the central symbol of their hope. Before Jesus came, God's house was a building, a location to which their imaginations and sometimes their feet journeyed towards. It was physical, but it was also metaphorical. For the Jewish people, the temple has always evoked the place of God's presence, a source of unity, and the hope of redemption. To this day, Jewish people end their Passover feast by saying "next year in Jerusalem". There is an internal compass that keeps their hearts and lives always pulling to the place they desire above all others.

For Christians, Christ's body is the new temple. Jesus brought the presence of God to earth in physical form. When he was raised, and his body taken, he left us the Eucharist, the physical and spiritual presence of the living God. We take his flesh into ourselves, becoming Christ's body on earth, participating in the Body of Christ with the whole church of God. Jerusalem is no longer geographically fixed. It is within us. We are the temple of God.

And, as with all Spiritual truths, the perfect theology of this is being worked out imperfectly through the messiness of our lives. We call this process sanctification. We know and believe a thing to be true, and as we live into it, often awkwardly tripping and stumbling towards it, God makes it true. The early church fathers spoke of the inner life as the place where the temple of God is constructed, and as we take steps to build, it is the place where heaven and earth meet. This work is not as quick as throwing a factory-built house on an empty lot. But it is far more valuable and enduring.

In contrast to the Hebrew Bible authors, who imagine our journey towards Jerusalem as a steady pilgrimage, this morning's New Testament authors infuse their messages with a sense of urgency. Paul and Jesus both urge God's people to awaken, as if the stupor of slumber is the natural condition of human consciousness. This numb inertia is incompatible with the urgency and activity required to build God's temple. Jesus tells the disciples to be ready, meaning to position themselves to act, like a runner toeing the line at a race, poised and prepared. He indicates that human life falls into comfortable patterns, and without deliberate preparation, we will miss opportunities to participate in God's work. And when Paul tells the Romans how to **live**, that word means to advance step by step. For both these authors, our life in God is meant to be actively and deliberately constructed.

For Paul, living the awakened life is about remembering our identity. We are children of the light. Paul was writing to people who were frustrated with living under the tyrannical

oppression and excessive taxation of their Roman overlords. He was offering them practical instruction regarding their need to submit to those unjust authorities as long as submission did not require them to disobey God. His instruction to them regarding honorable living was about upholding their witness and preserving their mission. He was urging them to use restraint and wisdom, not blind obedience, but living out their identity and calling, in the midst of darkness, as children of the light.

It seems obvious, but darkness is the absence of light. In a spiritual context, the darkness is the place where God's light does not shine. Since we are children of light, every action we take ought to infuse light into the world around us. Everything we feel and do in response to the world must be shaped by the truth of Christ's presence through us as light, and God's presence in us as the temple. When we wake from sleep, we see the mission, and we live into it. According to Paul, "making no provision for the flesh" means we stop living as if time were a limitless commodity, as if gratifying our short-term desires will satisfy our longings, and stop fighting with each other. We may be outraged by the circumstances of life in a broken world, but light cannot be other than bright. Our grief and outrage must always be tempered and shaped by the light that is within us, by our temple building pursuits, and the reality that the day of Christ's coming is near.

When Jesus talks about this in Matthew's gospel, he also speaks about preparedness. He likens the people of his day to those of Noah's time, living a normal life and doing normal things. Even Noah didn't know exactly what to expect or when to expect it to happen. So, the people carried on as if everything would always be the way they had experienced it, until it suddenly was not anymore.

Jesus repeats a theme carried throughout the Hebrew Bible; the coming of God. He uses an apocalyptic style typical of the prophets before him. The prophets had a lot to say about the coming of God. For them it indicated times when the appearance of God's mercy or justice would be profoundly experienced. Prophetic writing leaves the specifics

opaque because the point is that we cannot know what God's coming will look like or when it will happen. Jesus' intent is to stress our readiness so we can respond when he appears. The language he uses of taking and leaving people is invitational language. In Greek, this word "to take someone" means to pull them aside for a conversation or to do something specific together, not take them away. When Jesus speaks of people being left, the word means to permit, like saying "leave her alone", indicating God's willingness to defer to our desires. If we are children of the light, if we are awake and making choices that build us into the temple of God, if our lives are places where Heaven and earth meet, then we will be ready to follow Jesus whenever and wherever he appears.

Those to whom this message was addressed were facing the imminent destruction of Jerusalem. They didn't know it, but their entire world was about to be upended. And that wouldn't take place until after Jesus' death and resurrection which would also change the world as they knew it. Our lives are always changing. If we aren't prepared for change, the time of Christ's unexpected appearance may leave us paralyzed from joining God's work. If we're awake, if we're living as those who expect God to show up, to move, to act, to help, and to save, then we will be prepared to join that work when we see it.

For Isaiah and the Psalmist, deliberately moving towards Jerusalem was an act of hope. They kept their eyes fixed on their destination, trusting and living towards the peace they expected to find within the holy city. They beckoned everyone to join them in that pursuit, knowing the city is available to everyone who wishes to go. Now, as that city exists within us, we continue to beckon everyone we meet to join us as we move towards the safety, peace, and unity of God's presence. We do it imperfectly, but we stay alert, we prepare, and we call to one another, "come, let us walk in the light of the Lord".

May we be a people whose presence is saturated by the presence of God, whose choices consistently reflect the light of God. And as we enter Advent, may we prepare ourselves in hope for Christ's coming.