

Sermon 24.03.03

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LENT 3

John 2:13-25

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

Psalm 19 (from *Ancient Songs Sung Anew*, translation by Lynn Bauman)

The universe in eloquence proclaims your beauty, God.
The starry vault of sky each night
reveals the artistry of your hands.
Each day in time passes on its knowledge to the next,
night speaks to night across the ages.
All this without a language that we speak or know;
without a need for words, it's all been said.

But its voice and tones are everywhere
spreading out in waves across all space and time,
and in its vastness you have pitched a tent
as for a bridegroom, your burning Sun,
who like an athlete is eager for the race,
to run its course through time and space.
Rising up at one horizon it speeds across the sky,
nothing hidden from its fire, it passes out beyond the edge of earth.

Your words are also like this Sun, burning ring
across the inner landscape of the soul.
Their sound instructions, enlivening all, and giving wisdom to the simple ones.
The stable patterns of your ways give joy
and fill the heart with god,
bringing light to eyes that now can see.
Pure light, pure truth, pure justice, God,
they're like a cleansing wind
that passes through our souls, assessing all.

Your presence is more valuable to us than gold,
far sweeter to the tongue than honey in the comb.
For it is you, and you alone who teaches us,
O great instructor of the soul,
and in this school of wisdom, you, the reward.
Only you can discern the motives of the human heart,
sin from fault,
and fault from secret sin, unknown.

Cleanse us, Lord, and set us free from every weight.
Clear out the way,
make straight the paths before our feet,
lest we should fall.
Let every word we speak,
let every thought we think in heart and mind,
be pleasing to you, O God,
our Rock and our Redeemer.

Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End? Mary Oliver *Devotions*, p. 186

There are things you can't reach. But
you can reach out to them, and all day long.

The wind, the bird flying away. The idea of God.

And it can keep you as busy as anything else, and happier.

The snake slides away; the fish jumps, like a little lily,
out of the water and back in; the goldfinches sing
from the unreachable top of the tree.

I look; morning to night I am never done with looking.

Looking I mean not just standing around, but standing around
as though with your arms open.

And thinking: maybe something will come, some
shining coil of wind,
or a few leaves from any old tree—
they are all in this too.

And now I will tell you the truth.
Everything in the world
comes.

At least, closer.

And, cordially.

Like the nibbling, tinsel-eyed fish; the unlooping snake.
Like goldfinches, little dolls of gold fluttering around the corner of the sky
of God, the blue air.

SERMON

The temple - where does it begin and where does it end?

The Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann once warned that the quickest way to desecrate a landscape was to build a church — since the supposed “holy ground” would instantly imply that everything outside its doors is, well outside the holy, and somehow less a part of God.

Like the prophets before him, Jesus is challenging our tendency to domesticate God and put God into a box - into a temple or a church or a sacred system.

Do we see, really see, that all of creation shimmers with divine glory?

When we go to church, **we don't step into God's presence; rather, we step into a community that, at its best, helps call our attention to the fact that God is present everywhere, that the body of Jesus and the movement of the Spirit are boundless**, and so that the temple's architecture must extend all the way out — all the way to the expanding edges of the cosmos.¹

That all comes from a commentary by Matthew Myer Boulton, former Harvard theologian. Let me say that part again -

When we go to church, **we don't step into God's presence; rather, we step into a community that, at its best, helps call our attention to the fact that God is present everywhere, that the body of Christ and the movement of the Spirit are boundless.**

Let's step back for a minute and take a close look at our scripture.

We're in John chapter 2.

very beginning of this gospel. we have only 5 named disciples at this point, just walked away from Jesus' first public miracle - turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana.

Very different location for this story than in the other 3 gospels - in Matthew, Mark and Luke, where this story follows Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In those gospels, this story is the last straw for the Jewish authorities and becomes the impetus for Jesus' arrest. In John's gospel that final straw is the raising of Lazarus - a very different story, and yet it leads to his arrest and death.

¹

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/2/27/why-is-jesus-angry-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-3>

So this same story must serve a very different function in John's gospel - it's not the end of the story, it's found here in the beginning. Why? Why does John make this the first of Jesus' confrontations with the Jewish leaders?

In Matthew, Mark and Luke's gospels, Jesus' anger and criticism is that the temple has become a den of thieves. Here, in John, we hear him cry out 'stop making my Father's house a marketplace' (v 16).

Odd - because the temple doesn't function unless it is a marketplace.

Jesus enters the temple and finds what one would expect during a pilgrimage festival. The vital trades are in place for the necessary exchange of monies, animals, and grains for the required sacrifices. Nothing is out of order at this point.

For the temple system to survive the ordered transactions of a marketplace were essential. The temple had to function as a place of exchange for maintaining and supporting the sacrificial structures. Jesus is not quibbling about mismanagement but **calls for a complete dismantling of how the entire system is understood.**²

Jesus is not against the temple. He's a Jew, he's there for passover.

We must come back to the gospel writers' theological purpose:

Our story today is the first embodiment of John 1:14 'the word became flesh and dwelt among us.'

The purpose of this story is not to discount the temple, but to see that God dwells in Jesus - and for all to see and recognize that.

This theme is carried forward through John's gospel - in chapter 4, where Jesus meets the woman at the well, he tells her that it's neither the temple in Jerusalem nor on Mt Gerizim where they are to worship - and in chapter 9, where the blind man receives sight and gets down and worships Jesus. There it's about the bold recognition that God is present in Jesus, the blind man sees that; knows that. All of these stories point not to the rejection of the temple or Judaism, but a turning of the tables - temple practices are to show us where God shows up.

God has taken on flesh and dwelt among us.

And that Spirit of Jesus is the Christ - the One who is with us in the beginning, now and for always.

Jesus told the disciples shortly before his death: "The Spirit abides with you, will be in you, among you" (John 14:17)

Do we believe that? Do we live like we believe that?

This central message of John's gospel is that God came to dwell among us, in Jesus, and then, through the Spirit, in us.

2

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-john-21-3-22-3>

And so we have this story here, in John chapter 2.

This revolutionary notion that the Divine is not confined to the temple, but is here, present, among them, in the person of Jesus. And following the resurrection - continues to live on through us.

Where does the temple begin...where does it end?

Where is the Christ - the Spirit of Jesus - to be found among us today?

Have you heard of thin places?
of Third spaces?

Thin Places, writes Jordan Kisner - comes from a notion in Celtic mythology that the distance between our world and the next is never more than three feet (just a little more than an arm's reach away). There are "thin places" where that distance shrinks and then vanishes, where you can glimpse some other world or way of being for a brief moment. Often, "thin places" are literal places, geographical locations that feel holy or otherworldly,(SLIDE) - some are far away, famous, but others are right here, literally in our backyard (mine at least) - but you could also imagine these kinds of thresholds popping up anywhere: in a hospital room, (SLIDE) in a coffee shop, in your apartment, in your relationship,(SLIDE) *in* you.³

Thin places - where we glimpse the Divine here, on earth. Often, as I watch our prelude, I feel as though I'm seeing your thin places - where you glimpse God at work - whether it's vacationing in an exotic locale, or (SLIDE) noticing the first snow drops poking through the ground just outside the front door. Glimpsing the Divine, the work of the Divine, here in our midst.

Third spaces are similar, and a little different - they're places where people spend time between home ('first' place) and work ('second' place).⁴ They are locations where we connect with others - exchange ideas, have a good time, build relationships, where we connect with something larger than ourselves.

FACEBOOK and other virtual spaces may be places of connections - but the most effective ones for building real community seem to be physical places where people can easily and routinely connect with each other: churches, parks, gyms and even fast-food restaurants. McDonalds has become a gathering place - a safe place for conversation and connection for some.

Third spaces - usually outside of the "temple" as we know it, yet maybe these are places where we come to find Christ in our midst.

Safe spaces - connecting places:

³ <https://www.theisolationjournals.com/explore/prompt26-jordan-kisner>

⁴ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/third-places-as-community-builders/>

work days at Plowshares, caring for our outdoor spaces, worshiping around a fire,

Third spaces -

here in our building as outsiders become insiders, in places in our community like Webster's bookstore, at a place like Ten Thousand Villages, where we learn together about other cultures...

Third spaces, thin spaces - all around us. Right here.

In our scripture today Jesus is challenging our tendency to domesticate God and put God into a box - into a temple or a church or a sacred system and instead - he's radically inviting us to step into God's presence everywhere - reminding us that **the body of Jesus and the movement of the Spirit are boundless.**

The temple - this time of worship - is to remind us that God is here among us and with us wherever we find ourselves.

I end with the beginning of today's poem: (SLIDE)

There are things you can't reach.

But you can reach out to them, and all day long.

The wind, the bird flying away. The idea of God.

And it can keep you as busy as anything else, and happier.

When we show up here at church, we don't step into God's presence; rather, we step into a community that helps call our attention to the fact that God is present everywhere, that the body of Christ and the movement of the Spirit are boundless.

Go, look for the body of Christ, be the body of Christ...

for where does the temple begin and where does it end?