

Again & Again, We Are Shown the Way
I Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22
March 7, 2021

A few years ago I went to a family reunion in Lincoln, Nebraska, where I was born. On Sunday I was interested in worshipping at Trinity United Methodist Church. It is the church where my mom grew up as a child, my parents were married, and I was baptized. When I asked my aunt about the location, she said, "You just missed the old building. They moved into a brand new building a couple weeks ago." I was slightly disappointed that I had missed the opportunity by days, but we drove by the old church building, which was surrounded by fencing and no longer accessible to the public.

We attended worship at the new facility anyway, for that remains the community of faith that shaped my mother and her faith, and for which she led youth worship on Wednesday nights. Upon my baptism as an infant, that congregation, on behalf of the universal church, promised to nurture me in the Christian faith. No one at Trinity now knows my mother or me, but I know that community of faith as birthplace of my life in faith. I am grateful that Trinity still exists, that it continues to baptize children and nurture them in the Christian way of life.

Houses of worship are sacred spaces. They are designed to draw people into the presence of God. From ancient times, people of faith have revered holy places where we feel a sense of the Divine Presence. I want to reflect on the Jerusalem Temple, the setting of today's Gospel reading and for Jews at that time, the holiest place considered to be the dwelling place of God.

When David was King over Israel, the Lord promised that David would build God a "house." David's son, Solomon, inherited the task of building the Temple on land that his father had purchased for an altar. Solomon's Temple was destroyed in 587 BCE, and the people sent into exile in Babylon, separated from their beloved Jerusalem Temple. As strangers in a foreign land, they realized that they could worship anywhere with the confidence that God would hear their prayers and be their sanctuary. Even far from home, the people were shown the way to worship God.

The exiles returned home and the Second Temple was completed in the year 515 BCE. The second Temple did not compare in splendor to the Temple of Solomon, yet it served as the center of Israel's life after the exile. What it lacked in architectural beauty was covered over by the great devotion that the people

lavished upon it, and above all, by the conviction that it was the place where God resided. Back in their homeland, the people were shown a way to worship God even in a more modest building.

About 20 years before Jesus' birth, King Herod set out to rebuild the Temple to match the grandeur of his other building projects. Herod's plan adopted the dimensions of Solomon's Temple. This is the Temple we find Jesus entering in today's scripture. Jesus calls it "my Father's house." The use of the familial word, Father, is indicative of the intimate relationship between Jesus and God. It points to the house of worship providing an opportunity for sacred relationship with our Creator.

Upon entering the Jerusalem Temple, Jesus undertakes the dramatic action of driving out the animals intended for sacrificial rituals. He overturns the tables of the moneychangers who were facilitating the payment of the temple tax to cover the costs of the temple. The tax could not be paid with Roman coins that offended Jewish law with the image of the emperor. The money changers exchanged Roman money for coins from Tyre that had no "graven images." Pilgrims traveling many miles to observe Passover in Jerusalem could not carry animals from home. They needed to purchase animals without blemish to make the proper sacrifices. The trading going on by the money-changers and the animal sellers was essential to Israel's system of worship. But Jesus proclaimed that a new form of worship was approaching, worship that was not focused on a building or sacrifices, but on God made flesh in Jesus.

The Gospel of John was written very late in the first century, perhaps around the year 90. This was two decades after the Romans destroyed the Jerusalem Temple. To the Jewish Christians disoriented by the loss of their beloved Temple, John's Gospel communicates Jesus' radical new idea. As a sign of his authority, Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body, specifically of his death and resurrection. As John's community of faith grieved the loss of the Temple, the good news is that Jesus is now the dwelling place of God. The glory once visible in Israel's tabernacle and temple is now seen in Jesus. To know Jesus is to abide in the presence of God. God is known and visible, God is met and experienced, not in the ritual practices of the temple, but in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the face of yet another change, the people of God were shown a new way to worship.

Over the years, the people Israel experienced a multitude of changes in the locations and forms of worship. Always, even in a foreign land, God showed them

a way forward, ways that would bring them to and keep them in meaningful relationship with God. Always they were shown a way. God is faithful.

The congregation is going through a multitude of change. On top of the pandemic and a pastoral transition, we're in conversation about consolidation from two worship centers to one. Both the Stony Point worship center and Montgomery sanctuary are treasured by worshipping communities. Memories have been made in each. The aesthetics differ in each location and yet they draw people toward God. Our natural human tendency is to cling to the one which is familiar. We can't bear the thought of losing a treasured holy place. The very possibility evokes grief, pain, fear, anger, and anxiety. The possibility also evokes opportunity, creativity, energy, and rebirth.

The history lesson of the Jerusalem Temple teaches us that life happens, circumstances change, even buildings are destroyed – but one thing remains: the presence of God is always with us. It is not the building that we worship; we worship a living, dynamic, loving God. For Christians Jesus is our temple, the embodiment of God's essence. We can worship God anywhere as long as we know, love, and follow Jesus. The temple of Jesus' body was destroyed, and in three days it was raised up. Christ's resurrected presence lives on today, inspiring, encouraging, leading us toward new life. We do not worship buildings; we worship the God whom we know through Jesus Christ. Wherever we land, we will experience the very presence of our loving God because we invite Jesus to dwell with us. When we are open to the winds of the Spirit, God will show us the way.

Let us not make an idol of the past, of the way things were, even of a building we hold dear. We believe in a God who is making all things new. I invite you to engage in this process with a spirit of curiosity, trusting that God will show us the way, a way that will be life-giving and meaningful for all.

Let me take you back to Trinity UMC in Lincoln, Nebraska. When I saw the old building surrounded by a chain link fence, I figured it was going to be demolished. Last week I texted my aunt to see what took its place. She told me that the building was purchased by Grace Presbyterian Church. It continues to be a holy place of worship. Perhaps someday I'll get to see the place of my baptism after all. I trust that God will show me a way, just as God will show this faithful congregation a way forward.

Guiding God, we bow before you in earnest desire to know You and your will for our lives and our life together. You have planted deep faith and love in

our hearts and we long to express that love in worship and praise of You. We give thanks for the sights and sounds, the words and melodies which inspire our walk of faith. Even in our absence from in-person worship, we are grateful for connections which continue to bind us to one another and to You.

We praise you for the signs of new life around us. May they remind us that You are in the business of creating life and new life. We confess to You our resistance to change and the discomfort of uncertainty. We are afraid and anxious about all the changes we are experiencing. Help us plant our mind and spirit firmly in your presence. Lead us forward with assurance that all will be well.

Lead our congregation through this time of prayerful discernment. Keep us attuned to your will and way. Bless Pastor Janette Saavedra as she prepares to leave people whom she loves and move to Santa Rosa to lead this congregation.

Advise our community, state, and national leaders as they decide how best to reopen schools, places of work, businesses, & places we long to visit once again. We pray for the health and safety of all, and for renewed patience until it is deemed wise to resume activity.

Abide with those who are unsheltered and those who are displaced from campsites. Guide our community toward housing for all, especially the most vulnerable.

May the healing touch of Christ rest upon those struggling with illness, injury, or recovery from surgery. Abide with those under hospice care, offering your comforting presence. Be present with those coping with emotional distress, sharing courage to move onward.

Renew the resilience and strength of essential workers, health professionals, teachers, parents, and students.

We lift our prayer in the name of Christ, the true Guide whom we follow.
Amen.