

A NEW TEMPLATE
Sermon, November 20, 2016
Christ the King / Thanksgiving
Texts: Luke 21:5-19; John 2:18-22; I Peter 2:4-12

*Come, ye thankful people, come, raise the song of harvest home:
All is safely gathered in, ere the winter storms begin,
God, our Maker, doth provide for our wants to be supplied:
Come to God's own temple, come, raise the song of harvest home.*

Our last hymn will be sung in many churches today across the country. Originally, it comes from England; I'm told "Harvest Home," also called "Ingathering," was a traditional English harvest festival roughly similar to our Thanksgiving. The "songs of harvest home" give thanks to God for all His blessings of the past year; we have adopted this and other harvest home songs from other nations in our national observance of Thanksgiving ... for example, our final hymn this morning, "*We Gather Together*," comes from the Dutch; our opening hymn "*Now Thank We All Our God*" comes from the Germans (*and as mentioned in years past, "Nun danket alle Gott" is a command in the original German, as if to say, "Now we WILL thank God, no matter what!"*), and our offertory, "*Let All Things Now Living*," comes from the Welsh.

That last line of the first stanza of our previous hymn reads, "Come to God's Own Temple, Come." Here's a quick little theology quiz: Just where is "God's own Temple?" (*And don't say it's on the side of His forehead.*) Jesus alludes to "God's own Temple" in our second Gospel reading; the prophet Haggai alluded to it in a passage we read a few weeks ago, and Peter elaborates on this theme in our final reading.

The Temple of Jesus' day (*mentioned in our readings from Luke and John*) was one of the great wonders of the ancient world. It was a massive structure covering forty to forty-five acres and a tremendous symbol of national pride. This Temple was a renovation of the second Temple built in Haggai's time in the fifth century BC; the first Temple was built by Solomon but destroyed by the Babylonians, as mentioned two weeks ago. King Herod was determined to match and even surpass the glory of Solomon's original Temple by massively renovating this Temple built in Haggai's time. So Herod set to work on an ambitious and massive renovation beginning in 19 BC; the renovation was completed some eighty-two years later in 63 A.D. (*Unfortunately, the completed Temple would only stand seven more years; the Romans leveled it in 70 A.D. ... but I'm getting ahead of myself a bit.*) Over ten thousand laborers were involved in the renovation; it was indeed the buzz of the town and probably the major source of employment for the better part of a century. At the time of the Gospels, the renovation work was a little over half way done ... it had been going on forty-six years. The smallest stones in the walls of the massive structure weighed as much or more than the car you drove here this morning; two to three tons each. The larger stones weighed up to fifty tons and more!

The setting of our reading from John is what I like to call Jesus' Temple Tantrum; in the previous verses we read how He had exploded in a rage and drove out the moneychangers and animal sellers with a whip, saying "*How dare you turn my Father's house into a market?*" Some said to Him, "*Where's your authority to do all this? Show us some sign!*" Jesus replied, "*Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.*" They scoffed back, "*It has taken forty-six years to build this temple thus far, and you are going to raise it in three days?*" But, John explains for us, "*... the temple He had spoken of was His body. After He was raised from the dead, His disciples recalled what He had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words Jesus had spoken.*"

So ... where is God's own Temple? Well, Jesus intimates it is found in Him. Excuse me while I risk getting into the theological "weeds" for a moment, but I just find this theme fascinating. The function and purpose of a Temple is to provide a place where people may encounter God. The Bible tells us that in Jesus' incarnation, we see the perfect union between God and humanity fleshed out, and in His broken body and shed blood, Jesus provides the true "meeting place" between God and His people. Where do people encounter the living God? In Jesus Christ. And in His body, He is the new Temple. A related aside: The sermon title makes a play on the word "template." The dictionary defines "template" as a mold, a pattern, a model for others to copy. The New Temple is also the new Template-ate, in that He is the perfect "pattern," the model for us to try and copy in our own lives.

If you remember from two weeks ago, the people of Haggai's time were getting ready to rebuild the ruined Temple that had stood four centuries, built by King Solomon, and flattened by the invading Babylonians.¹ God had

¹ See <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/but-wait-theres-more-2016.pdf>

said to them in so many words: says: *"Ask the people, 'Who of you is left who saw this Temple in its former glory?'* He went on to tell them, *"One day the glory of the new Temple will far surpass that of the old. But for now, don't be discouraged! Be strong and go to work! FOR I AM WITH YOU."* God had made two promises ... First, that the glory of the new Temple will one day far surpass that of the old. Second, He promised, *"I AM WITH YOU NOW."* He went on to say through the prophet in so many words, *"So, go to work! Go to work in the midst of how it is, with what you got, in the time you have; work hard to redeem this troubled world around you and to make good memories and a solid religious foundation and heritage for those who do not have the wonderful memories and opportunities you may have had. Yes, the ultimate fulfillment of My promises may be on a far distant horizon; there may be a long time between here and now and there and then. But, in the meantime, I AM WITH YOU. So, be strong and go to work!"*

Scholars believe that veiled in that first promise of a glorious new Temple to come is a prophecy of Jesus Christ Himself, as Jesus somewhat cryptically remarks in John 2. A temple, Peter goes on to elaborate, made up of "living stones." This is a grand Temple that will grow to extend throughout the entire world, not just forty-five acres in Jerusalem; this new Temple will be a "place" in which God's Spirit dwells, with Christ as the cornerstone. The new Temple isn't limited to the single human body of Jesus Christ ... the new Temple is what the New Testament calls the "body" of Christ, the church ... THAT'S where God's Spirit dwells and fills the whole world, bringing the good news of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ in word, deed and action. You and I and all the communion of saints are living stones in that ever-growing temple of God. Now, that's a BIG Temple! As our new president-elect might say, "That's YYYUUGE!" This is the imagery used by Peter: *"As you come to him, the Living Stone, rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him, you also like LIVING STONES are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood ... You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praise of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light."* By faith we are part of that Body of Christ, living stones, part of that new Temple, sticking together, united in Christ, built up in Christ and called to be living, breathing, rock solid, faithful people declaring by word and deed *"... the praise of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light."*

In our reading from Luke, Jesus and His disciples are again at the Temple in Jerusalem, and Jesus tells them this magnificent, massive structure would, in fact, one day come falling down, not just in allegory. *"Not one stone will be left on another;"* He said, *"every one of them will be thrown down."* And about forty years later, that happened. In 70 AD, the Temple did come down; again, just seven years after Herod's renovation was finally finished. The Roman general Titus, with 80,000 men, set siege to Jerusalem; it was a difficult city to take, set on a hill, and defended by fierce fighting. When the siege was successful and the city taken, Titus ordered the whole city and the Temple razed to the ground, like the Babylonians before him. The historian Josephus, who was actually there, tells us 97,000 residents of the city were taken captive and over one million died. As some of you know, a portion of a retaining wall of that Temple, called the Western Wall or the Wailing Wall, remains to this day. This is the most holy prayer spot for the present-day Jewish faithful. It really is a moving and inspiring place to be; there are people praying at this holy site 24/7; in fact, you can even access a live camera feed via the internet.

At the time Jesus spoke these words, the disciples probably listened in disbelief. This magnificent Temple would come down? Unbelievable! *"Teacher,"* they said. *"When will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?"* Jesus replied: *"Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them. When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away."* Then he said, *"Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven."*

As briefly mentioned last week, except for a brief allusion later in this chapter, Jesus is not primarily talking about "The End," He is talking of the days IN BETWEEN now and The End. Jesus' words to His disciples are basically, *"Don't let the troubles to come stop you."* There is work for the followers of Jesus to do in the time we have. Yes, there will continue to be troubled times wars and rumors of war, nation will rise against nation, there will be earthquakes, famines, plagues, and even elections. This Gospel passage is sort of mislabeled by the heading in our pew Bibles; this really isn't about the Signs of the End of the Age. No, Jesus is basically telling His disciples about the times BETWEEN now and The End. He tells them troubles will come, and encourages them to *"Stand firm, do your duty, go to work, stay faithful, and I will be with you."* In short, remain faithful, stand firm, KEEP WORKING, and do what you can to redeem these hard times and make them BETTER. He calls His followers to BE the "signs" during these times, to be signs and witnesses that show the way to the Way, the Truth and the Life in a lost and troubled world, signs that point the way to "God's own Temple" ... and bids them to come and be part of something glorious!