

“Come and See Faith Set Free”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

Third Sunday after Epiphany

Edina Morningside Community Church; January 21, 2018

John 2:13-22

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 marketplace!” 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.

What do all these things have in common: horses, currency, the compass, the telegraph, internal combustion engines, radio, the Internet, and smartphones? These are all examples of “disruptive technology”—transformational new methods of trading, traveling or communicating. They have an outsize impact on the history of civilization, changing the course of human activity in revolutionary, unforeseen ways. Fifty years from now, which of these will be added to the list: virtual reality, artificial intelligence, 3D printing, gene editing, or driverless vehicles? Which of them will have the effect in the 21st or 22nd centuries that the printing press had in the 16th century? It’s easy to recognize disruptive technology after-the-fact, but we are surrounded by such innovations in their infancy today.

In the realm of civilization-scale disruptions and entire changes in human consciousness, would we ever think about Jesus in the same way? After all, for several millennia in the Western world *time itself* was disrupted, measured by his birth, into B.C. and A.D. We start to understand why in today’s Scripture reading, which shows the disruption of Jesus on temple practices in Jerusalem. The “technology” of divine presence—of God being “findable” in the world—takes a light-year leap through Jesus’ incarnation.

For centuries, Jewish followers of the Living God had shown their dedication by offering a portion of their possessions for God’s use, usually by sacrificing animals or giving away the first-fruits of the harvest. Though this was once done in many sacred places, by the time of Jesus the one place for such sacrifices was the magnificent temple in Jerusalem. Pilgrims from all over Israel and beyond streamed to Jerusalem for this purpose, especially during major festival times like Passover. When Jesus came upon it, the temple was like a great outdoor bazaar where coins of the Roman Empire were exchanged for Jewish ones that could be used for buying sacrifices. All the 24/7 commerce around the temple testifies to an assumption of such temples throughout the ancient world: this is the place; this is the address of the Hebrew God. The temple was the fixed-in-stone successor to earlier manifestations of God’s presence: cloud by day and fire by night in the wilderness after Egyptian slavery, the Tent of Meeting where Moses and God spoke face to face, and the Ark of the Covenant that was carried into battle. At the time of Jesus, the Ark sat within the Jerusalem temple, communicating that Yahweh could especially be found here.

But Jesus the disrupter does something else. It’s not the overturning tables and shooing sheep, though that creates an audience for him. Rather, a revolution in religious consciousness becomes evident by what he says to the religious authorities. “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” They have no idea what he’s talking about. Surely nobody could singlehandedly destroy the giant Jerusalem temple, nor raise it again in three days! Then John gives us the clue that disciples would later receive in the resurrection: “he was speaking of the temple of his body”. Jesus de-centers the Jerusalem temple as God’s address. Rather, he moves the location of God from a particular fixed spot on the map to traveling

out and about in the world, in his own flesh-and-blood presence. *Jesus* is the temple, and all who would call upon God need look no further than Jesus himself.

It's worth mentioning here that Jews after Jesus also "decentered" the temple and made it a *symbol* of divine presence. Not long after Jesus, the Jerusalem temple was destroyed by Roman armies, and synagogues started to be the way Jewish traditions were kept alive. Jews no longer believe that bricks and mortar house the living God. Their sacrifices, like those of Christians, take on spiritual, financial and embodied forms rather than that of cows and goats. We differ in our understandings of Jesus as Messiah, but both faiths agree that God has no GPS coordinates on the earth. God is on the loose.

This understanding of faith caused huge disruption as it started taking off. For analogy's sake, consider the way that the community bank functions in that classic movie "It's a Wonderful Life". The bank was where everyone went to make their transactions. If a person needed cash, wanted to make a deposit, or asked for a loan, all paths led through the doors of the Bailey Building and Loan. That used to be how every bank in the world operated. Now imagine if you showed up there, and told George Bailey that banks didn't need to be in just one place. Banks can be in grocery stores, and offer cash at automated machines. People can deposit checks and apply for loans on the fly. Banking happens wherever people are, wherever there's a cell phone and an internet connection. It would have been mind-boggling disruption to George Bailey, yet now it's our everyday reality.

So, if two thousand years ago the temple of God's presence became Jesus in flesh and blood, where is that body? Where is Jesus' body today? It's here, in the church called "the body of Christ". It's as though Christ's physical body were dispersed into a million billion atomic particles and given to each of *us*, transforming us into moving, breathing manifestations of the God's presence also. Jesus' radical message about the temple implies two things for Christians today: that we think a little less of buildings, and a little more of human interactions.

God does not hold special regard for fancy cathedrals or biblical museums. Spaces can feel sacred, and we rightly care for places where the spirit is renewed, but the point is never the building itself. The Divine Design campaign last year and the remodeling project this year are not ultimately to improve the property. The annual budget we vote on today, with all its support for offices, heat, electricity, internet, and the like, serves a purpose beyond bricks and mortar alone. All this is to better prepare the congregation for our divine mission of welcoming and serving *everyone*—member or not, in the building or not—*everyone* who needs to experience the joy of Christ's love. And it's not essential that people come to a church *building*—this one or any other—in order to "find God".

It's more likely these days that people will encounter God *beyond* the church building, through *us* as the body of Christ. Faith is set free from being confined to a geographic place, but moves as readily as human beings do, bearing God's face *everywhere*. To those weary from endless partisan bickering, God is manifest when we honor the image of God in someone with whom we disagree. To those segregated by money, color, social media or political creed, God is manifest when we humble ourselves and model learning from difference. To those working behind cash registers or on the other end of the customer service line, God is manifest in our words of blessing and kindness. To those children and grandchildren who struggle to find their way in the world, God is manifest in our loving counsel. To those elders who feel forgotten, God is manifest in a phone call, card or visit when it's least expected. To those who are hungry and begging by the side of the road, God is manifest in the sharing of food and a gentle word. Christians go through our entire lives seeking ways that manifest God to one another, our families, our communities and the world. Because the temple is no longer in Jerusalem; faith is set free in you and me.

I sometimes lament that the church will be the last place to ever have modern technology, but that's not using God's imagination. Do you want to see the latest disruptive technology, agents of a divine alternative to the wounded status quo of our times? Look around! *We* are God-bearers to the world, the "living stones" of Jesus' temple-body now. Amen.