

## *The House, The Temple, The Hope*

John 2:13-22

The Rev. Jeffrey T. Foels

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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### **The Third Sunday in Lent**

Where do we place our hope? What does it mean to be a house of hope? For the people of Israel, living in Jesus' time, there was a clear house of hope – the Temple, in Jerusalem. The most holy place in the world. The scene of today's story.

2000 years ago, as Jesus was entering that temple, he was preceded by another thousand years by the existence of a temple on that site, built by King Solomon, who built the first temple of the Jewish people, the Hebrews living in Jerusalem in 1000 B.C. We have scriptural record of the details of Solomon's temple – an interior fifty feet high, 180 feet long; ninety feet wide. Beams made of the cedars of Lebanon; a great veil, a curtain of blue and purple and gold. Gold leaf inside, and a smaller chamber in the back that was the Holy of Holies – the place where the Ark was kept, that contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments, a chamber into which only the highest priests could enter, and only on the holiest days.

This first temple was destroyed four hundred years after it was built, torn down during the defeat of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians, who pillaged and burned the city, and took the Jewish people with them back to Babylon, into exile. It was the Temple for which the people in exile wept, when they were by the rivers of Babylon, remembering Zion, remembering the city, and the temple. These are the stories we read in the books of Kings and Chronicles, the background of the prophetic works of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

After seventy years, when the Jewish people returned to Israel, they began rebuilding. In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we see the Jewish people rebuilding, rededicating, figuring out what it meant to worship and to again be the people of God. The second temple was built on the site of the first, and less about it is known and recorded in scripture. The inner sanctuary remained, but we find no more mention of the Ark of the Covenant, though several of the other treasures of the first temple were given back to the Israelites by the Persians.

In the years leading up to Jesus' birth, a king in Israel began the work of expanding, building, growing the Temple complex. The work would begin 20 years before Jesus's birth, continuing beyond his death – all told the expansion of the temple would take nearly 80 years. It was a massive project, paid for with a temple tax, all undertaken by a king who wished to perpetuate his name through building projects. The king lived at the uneasy juncture of being an Israelite himself, yet propped up as a Roman official, a kind of governor. The king's name was Herod, the king at Jesus' birth.

The temple was the center of religious practice, not only for the people of Jerusalem, but for Jews around the Mediterranean, who would return for holidays, for Passover, to make sacrificial offerings to God, according to the customs laid out in Deuteronomy, and Exodus. These folks entering the city from around the known world would change their money there, would buy animals fit for sacrifice so that they could avoid the trouble of bringing them along for the journey. It was an institution – the institution of faith for the Israelites.

Where in our lives do we put our faith, our trust?

What we read this morning, from the Gospel of John, this is a story that shows up in all four Gospels, with a key distinction. In Matthew, and Mark, and Luke, this story occurs after Palm Sunday, and is an inciting incident that leads in part to Jesus' death. Here in John's Gospel, coming in the second chapter, this is more or less how Jesus begins his public ministry.

Jesus is there during the Passover, along with countless others, there for the holy days, there for the time to make a sacrifice to God, to travel into Jerusalem to make the sacrifice at the temple. By Jewish law, seen in the Old Testament, all of this money-changing and selling of animals was permissible. Exodus describes the temple tax to be paid, and Deuteronomy lays out the exact practice of people in far-flung areas selling their livestock at home, taking that money with them to Jerusalem, and buying a new sacrificial animal there. What they were doing was legal, so why Jesus' objection?

In the other Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke make clear that there's corruption going on – that they're not taking care of the widows and orphans, that all this commerce isn't benefiting the people, but rather just lining pockets. In those Gospels, Jesus objects to what they were doing, their corrupt behavior.

Here in John, Jesus' objection is not to their actions, but to their hearts. Jesus sees how for so many at the temple, they put their hope and trust in the Temple, instead of in God.

Where do we place our faith?

Jesus was not the first to criticize the temple. In Jeremiah, God speaks to the prophet, to say that putting faith in the temple is deceptive, and rather to let our actions reflect the call of the Lord to live justly. Jesus continues his temple critique later in John, just two chapters on, making clearer his whole point, saying to the Samaritan woman at the well "The hour is coming when you will worship neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem," and that "the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth." The move Jesus wants is clear – to see God as the point of it all.

So here in the temple, he begins speaking about this – he says of himself, destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. We can excuse the people for not getting it, not yet understanding that Jesus was speaking of his own death and resurrection. But their response is also telling. It has already taken 46 years for this temple to be built so far, and you would raise it up in three days? The world doesn't work like that.

And Jesus' point is made – the world does not work like that. But God does.

Here at the beginning of the Gospel of John, Jesus is showing the world the difference between placing our hope and trust in God, or placing our faith in the things of this world.

We can already hear part of the challenge of placing our trust in the things of the world, in the voices of those who are saying "It has already taken 46 years, why would things be any different?"

This is a voice of weariness, of worldliness, of being around long enough to know how things go, and how things fall short, how big hopes get disappointed and so we hope with small hopes, basking in a level of disappointment. We know better than putting big hopes in human things. And so here is Jesus saying – there is another way, there is a truer way, there is a way of living into hope in which the end is not so fruitless, our hopes ultimately living through the disappointments of the world. So where do we place our hope?

And when do we find ourselves saying – the temple has already been under construction for 46 years? It has already taken 46 years, I know it's a little hopeless, but I don't want to get disappointed. So where do we place our hope?

We place our hope and trust in God. We place our hope in God's working through us, through this world today, and yesterday, and tomorrow. We place our hope that God is working through us – that inspired by God, led by the Holy Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our lives, with the hope of bringing about God's reign here on earth. We do not naively approach such hopes, in the belief that nothing will be required of us to bear that hope into reality. We place our hope in God, and then we work for forty-six years to bring about that promise, to bring about that holy work.

Because when we place our half-hearted hope in the broken and limited things of this world, we inevitably encounter despair. If our whole hope is placed in our political system, we can end up in despair when it fails to tackle fundamental challenges facing our country, our people, the health and safety of our children, the well-being of those who have served our nation, the division sown daily in our midst.

If instead we put our trust in God, we are inspired to keep working, even when the system seems hopeless. That God puts us into places where we can touch one another's hearts, that our God-given gifts of wisdom and insight can be applied toward good ends.

If our whole hope is placed in our own selves, that we will succeed where others have failed, or that we will be sustained by the virtue of our choices, then we can end up in despair when our bodies break down, when bad luck befalls us, when we are tired and done.

If instead we put our trust in God, we are inspired to listen for God's call in our lives, those small places where we can uniquely respond and act, yet to remember that we are not alone, and that sometimes our call is to rest, and turn to God in praise.

If our whole hope is placed in our past, or in our future. That things will necessarily return to a brighter day when the sky was blue, or that things will be so changed by the passage of time as to solve all our ills. Then our despair may come when the golden times are forgotten by all others, or when the future always seems out of reach.

If instead we put our trust in God, we are reminded of God's presence with us in all of life. That God was with us in our pasts, and remains steadfast with us in our future, and that God calls us here, today, in our present, that as beloved children of God we are called to be and remain faithful in our following, inspired in our work. Returning to God, again and again, to hope that will never be shaken. Thanks be to God. Amen.