

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House  
Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 9, 2010

No Temples Required...  
©2010 Ray Bagnuolo

---

I grew up in the northernmost of the five boroughs of New York City: The Bronx! The only borough not primarily located on an island and the last of the 62 counties established in New York State!

It was my home until I was nearly 20 years old.

In many ways, the church was the center of a lot of activity. That probably had a lot to do with the fact that I attended a parochial school attached to the church. My parents, like many others, were always doing one thing or another with the church, and I always seemed to be getting dragged along!

My earliest memories of the church were of it being absolutely mysterious. This whole notion of God being in this church awed me. I liked going into the sanctuary when it was empty, especially, and just sitting there. It was as if I was trying to catch hold of something.

Looking back today and in light of today's readings and those of recent weeks, it's easy to see how we all have been the beneficiaries of those who, over the ages, have sought the same: sought God, a place of God, a place to be with God. A place that had the smells and sounds, including silence, all wrapped up into the mystery of God.

Today's little provocation is about the temples we think we need, only to discover that they may no longer be required in the ways they once were. As wonderfully, lovingly, and magnificently made by human hands as they were -- the attempt at some level was to assure the availability of the divine when needed: a house of God, so to speak.

"Go to church! To pray. To talk with God. To worship."

There is a lot of commentary the rise and fall of churches, and how church and the *emerging church* is linked to generations: generations of pre-modernity, modernity, post modernity, Boomers, Gen-X...

There is a lot to be learned from such studies about who we are and the way in which we do things, and even the ways in which we can be helpful to others. Still, it often feels as though these studies are prescriptions for "fixing something" or "addressing something" -- and most often that "something" has to do with what it will take to bring people back together in worshipping communities. There are

many groups interested in understanding these shifts and finding answers and solutions to the questions and problems.

For me, the only reason to bring people in – is to send them out. And, the only way to bring people in is to expand our vision and practice enough to offer people ways to be included in serving and helping others...and in so doing know the see the world and mission as God, without limiting God to building.

The idea of the “emerging church for me” is not about catching the wave but letting the wave refresh and move us towards those on the shore waiting...

Karen Ward, Church of the Apostles in Seattle puts it this way:

The emerging church is being willing to take the red pill [reference to Neo in *Matrix*], going down the rabbit hole, and enjoying the ride. It is Dorothy not in Kansas anymore yet finding her way home. It is Superman braving kryptonite to embrace Krypton. It is sight seeking wider vision, relationships seeking expanded embrace, and spirituality seeking holistic practice. It is a “road of destination” where Christ followers, formerly of divergent pasts, are meeting up in the missional present and moving together toward God’s future.”

But what of temples...

The perceptive flaw in much broader concepts of “temples” or Houses of God; Houses of Worship is that they can somehow contain God.

It is in that driving perception of the whole early model from antiquity to the monstrance in the tabernacle on the altar of my youth – is flawed.

Go to church to pray!

Why not “Go to a mountain to pray!” The desert, the shore, a nursing home, a park...

“Sight seeking wider vision....”

The resistance to “seeking the wider vision” is manifold. And, it is not just generational; it’s been around for a while.

The Temple of Solomon, the first of what are considered three temple phases in the life of the Israelites, goes back to the 10<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. It was central, complex, and played a cultic role in the life of the Israelites. It housed the artistic and aesthetic standards of the Ancient Near East...and it was also the center of the political power of the monarchy.

Rebuilt twice and renovated through every ruler and time, the Temple had three main phases between those early times and 70 C.E. Throughout those times, the temple building itself was not a place of public gathering and prayer, although its courtyards were a place where such activity would take place. Rather it was seen as a dwelling place on earth for the ancient deity of Israel [the Holy of Holies]... temples that in many ways followed the much early practices of the Canaanites.

When Christianity emerged from these same sociopolitical and theological currents, much was carried forward, in spite of Jesus' warning that the temple would ultimately be destroyed, which I don't think this was a matter of clairvoyance or prophecy. I think for Jesus, it was a fact. Peoples' need for an intersection between heaven and earth – for God – that is, the temple, would no longer be relevant. What was relevant was what always was relevant:

All that was needed was the schema:

"Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One" (*Shema Yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai ehad*)

It continues:

"You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you today shall be in you heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children and you shall speak of them when you are sitting at home and when you go on a journey when you lie down and when you rise up..."

Paul: "Pray without ceasing..."

I still love the places that cause me to be in awe and cause me to think of "other than me" which is almost a sure way to think of God in one way or another. I love the chance to gather in these communities of worship and prayer and the mystery of currents that touch us in more ways than we can know...

And in spite of all the studies and planning for future and future churches these walls have to go. We need to be able to see through them to God and Other in this world in every single moment that we can. And when we gather here, let it be to refresh, to welcome the wave, the awe and of the shema and all that brings you to God and others in your life...

In today's reading of Revelation, the author, John of Patmos laid it out:

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the royalty of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day-and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.

The New Jerusalem, this Jerusalem in which we now live is already with us, in us, and all around us.

And, now for the good part:

This from John the Evangelist, in this morning's gospel:

In this reading, outside the Temple, Jesus sees the person with conditions lying by the pool, trying to get to the waters of healing:

"Do you want to be made well?"

The sick man might as well have said,

[Of course I want to get well, but] Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me."

And Jesus simply says, "Stand up, take your mat and walk."

Stand up, take your mat, walk... show all the power of God in your life. It's already there. God is already here and accessible. No intermediaries required [remember the Protestant Reformation?!] Now, go and help others. Find places to gather and worship and pray... and go and help others for those things too are worship and prayer.

And he did this on the Sabbath. A direct challenge to those who were to accuse him of violating the Sabbath law by healing on a day of rest.

And, they were outside the temple. The healing took place outside the temple. Nothing like a direct challenge to those who would contain God.

Temples are no longer required to find the God I sought in my youth. Place of worship, for me, are now the places we gather as a gateway of comings and goings, living and practicing the shema, seeing worship in all we do in mission and service to others.

The question well may be the difference between waiting in a temple for God to come out or going out into the temple of God with God. As one author puts it"

Can human initiative help in any way with bringing about the coming reign of God, or should we just leave it all in God's hands? In Revelation 21... [we find] that the city may be from heaven, but we can be a means of channeling God's grace into it." (Interpreters Bible, Volume XII, p. 729, 2.)

There's nothing to be afraid of in finding God in all places. In fact, it's exactly what we do here.

Sounds just like what we do here.