

### **Lent 3 B 2021**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

March 7, 2021

John 2:13-22; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; Exodus 20:1-17 [Psalm 19]

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Three weeks ago, on the Sunday of the Transfiguration, I mentioned the Celtic concept of “thin places.” An idea expressed with words similar to these: Heaven and earth are only three feet apart. But that in “thin places,” they are much closer. It’s a way to explain the sense of wonder that visitors experience in certain geographic locations. The island of Iona. Or on a mountaintop such as Mount Carmel, or inside a cathedral like Notre Dame. In “thin places” heaven is much closer to earth. The distance between the two is narrow, is thin.

The lessons today are all about the nearness of God, about thin places, about locations where the will of heaven, to quote Jesus in his famous prayer, is done on earth. The will of heaven is done on earth. Where? At the center of today’s scripture readings, Jesus identifies himself as the temple of God. Our Lent journey is peppered with references to the death and resurrection of Jesus, the destination of our journey. Today’s gospel is one such reference, one such prediction, of Jesus’ death and resurrection: *“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up... “...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.”* It’s a prediction of Holy Week, but it’s also a claim, an argument, that the thin place where God is near is not the Jerusalem Temple, but the person of Jesus, God intersecting with humankind.

One of the internal tensions of the Bible is the temple. David wanted to build a temple, but God demurred. David’s son Solomon did build the Temple with God’s blessing. But it was often denigrated by the prophets. One thinks of the great prophet Jeremiah sneering and mocking, *“the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.”* [Jeremiah 7:4] There is a running tension about the value and validity of the Temple in both Old and New Testaments. Jesus is attacking the misuse and corruption of the temple cult, in today’s reading from John’s Gospel, and provocatively suggesting that he is the temple, the place where people can find God. The place on earth where heaven’s will is done.

With good reason, this gospel reading is accompanied by the Ten Commandments. Although the Ten Commandments were given to Moses on Mount Sinai— another thin place, a mountaintop shrouded in clouds where Moses is said to have interacted with God face-to-face {Deut. 34:10} — although it took place on the mountain, the mountain is not the place where earth meets heaven. The Law is the place where earth meets heaven. The Law is where the will of heaven is done on

earth. The Law is the covenant, the relationship, in which God is always present with his people. Far from being a mere code of ethics, far from being a foundation for civil law, the Ten Commandments are about the presence of God, That's abundantly clear because keeping God's name holy, honoring the sabbath, placing God ahead of all false gods, and striving to resist covetousness and jealousy— these are not the concerns of the sheriff's department or the state legislature. But they are essential to the practice of the presence of God. For the Jews, when there is no temple in Jerusalem (which there has not been since the days of the New Testament) the observance of the Law is what preserves their relationship with God. There is great blessedness in walking with God in this way. That's what we were singing about that psalm moments ago: *The teaching of the Lord is perfect and revives the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure and gives wisdom to the simple. The statutes of the Lord are just and rejoice the heart.* Revival, rejoicing, wisdom. This is so much more than “*Thou shalt eat thy spinach,*” and “*Thou shalt look both ways before crossing the street.*”

So we have thin places, places where heaven touches the earth. The Jerusalem Temple has been one such place. But it was prone to corruption and abuse, and all that remains is Herod's wall. The gospel at the center of our service today asserts that Jesus is the new temple, Jesus is the thin place, Jesus is where heaven meets earth, where God meets humanity. And we have the much older law given to Moses at Mount Sinai and epitomized by the Ten Commandments. Walking humbly and living wisely with an awareness of the presence of God.

Today's final nomination for a thin place, where heaven and earth overlap, comes from First Corinthians. *We proclaim Christ crucified.* The cross is the unexpected place where God meets humanity. A stumbling block. Foolishness. Because the cross was an instrument of capital punishment. A gas chamber, a hangman's noose, a firing squad, lethal injection. Capital punishment carried out by the state against capital offenders. After the first 350 years, the cross became the object of reverence that we see adorning our churches, our jewelry, even as a tattoo. Many Protestants still shudder at the idea of seeing Jesus' body on the cross, popularly called a crucifix. That's not the Jesus *I* worship, some of them say. I worship the Jesus of the resurrection, not the crucifixion.

But that's now what Paul says, is it? Paul never mentions the empty tomb. Paul talks about the cross. A scandal, an offense, a stumbling block, foolishness. It signifies that God's power is in weakness, God's will is done through sacrificial love. In the low places, in the overlooked places, in the marginal places— there is where God is active. This is the profound and upsetting proclamation of Paul that becomes part of our proclamation as well. Martin Luther famously spoke of theologians of the cross in contrast to theologians of glory. The Church needs to be with Paul, proclaiming Christ crucified, even when that lacks marketing appeal to the masses. Even when it seems unsophisticated. Some will demand flashy signs. Some will want the wisdom that confers prestige and riches. But that's not the message about Jesus that Paul brings.

In our hymn today, we sing of God's beauty. Which beauty is that? A sunset over the Pacific Ocean? A painting by Michelangelo? Mount Fuji rising above the clouds? *Holy God, holy and*

*beautiful, beauty unsurpassed. You are despised, rejected, scorned, you hold us fast. And we behold your beauty.*

The lessons today are all about the nearness of God, about thin places, about locations where the will of heaven, to quote Jesus in his famous prayer, is done on earth. The will of heaven is done on earth. Those places have included the Jerusalem temple. They have included the Ten Commandments. They have included the crucifixion of Jesus. All of those things speak to us. But all of those things: Law, Temple, Wisdom, Power, Cross, all of those are part of Jesus. The one place where we can always find God. Amen.