

The Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
November 14, 2021
Pentecost 25

The Temples We Build

Many of you know that my wife, Rosanna, is a Canadian by birth. We met while playing soccer in college. One of the stories that Rosanna's parents tell is that their biggest concern in sending their daughter down "to university" in the states was that she would fall in love with an American and never move back to Canada!

Well, I never thought I would end up with someone from another country either and I'll admit that I was completely ignorant to Canada like many Americans who don't live near the border. But being married to a Canadian has been fun and enlightening in many ways. I have learned about different food, languages, people, and cultures. I even spent one summer playing amateur soccer in Toronto.

I don't know if you have ever been to Toronto, but if you have, then you probably remember the CN Tower. The CN or Canadian National Tower is iconic for Toronto and all of Canada. It is a massive downtown tower built for broadcasting TV and radio and you can see it from miles and miles away. It's quite a feat of modern engineering. It rises 1815 feet and 5 inches above downtown Toronto. Each year something like 1.5 million people visit it. You can go up to the top of it and look down through big glass windows and eat at a revolving restaurant. You can even put on a harness and walk outside on a 5-foot-wide ledge 116 stories above the ground.

When the CN Tower was built in the 1970s, it took around 1500 people working on the job for nearly four years, 24 hours per day. When I first visited Toronto, I remember my wife's family saying, "Check out this large building we have!" This tower has its own chapter in the Guinness Book of World Records. When it was completed in 1975, it became the tallest building in the world. And -- you know what? -- it stayed that way as the tallest building in the world for decades, for 34 years... until one

day when it wasn't. Eventually somebody, somewhere built one that was taller, because that is what happens.

The Second Temple that is the context of our Gospel reading today was also truly something to behold. Under Herod the Great, it became a marvel of the ancient world. The large stones that Jesus' disciples pointed out to him in our reading today were apparently the size of a semi-truck's box trailer. Massive! Weighing 100 tons! When they built the CN Tower they got to use Olga, a 10 ton Sikorsky helicopter for the last 44 pieces. I can't imagine how they built this massive temple without modern technology.

Not only was it's architecture and size something to behold, but this temple was the center of the cultural and religious life of an entire nation. This was where you went to be made right with God, to say your prayers, to make sacrifices. It was where God showed up. It was their compass. Their foundation. Their holiest place.

So, imagine the disciples' reactions -- these Jews whose life revolves around the Temple cult just like their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, going back forever -- when they hear their rabbi saying, "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down!"

"Why is he saying that?" one asked.

"Wait, what does that mean?" another jumped in.

Peter, James, John, and Andrew -- knowing the principle that praise is best done in public and council in private -- they wait until they get a moment alone with Jesus before they say, "Tell us! Tell us, when will this be? And how will we know that the Temple is about to be destroyed?" If he did not have the disciples' attention before, he certainly has it now. And -- guess what -- in the year 70, while some of the Apostles were still alive, after another Jewish revolt to overthrow their occupiers, the Romans destroyed that Temple. There was hardly stone left on stone. The Pharisees and the Sadducees -- indeed, all of the

Jewish religion and her people -- suffered a terrible loss that year when the Temple was destroyed.

I don't think you and I can imagine how inconceivable it would have been for people to hear Jesus talk like this, but I think he understood something about change which is hard for us to hear: no matter how tall the tower, no matter how impressive the building, it will not last forever.

Of course, this applies in our own lives, too, and it's hard for us to hear. We work and we strive to build things that matter so much to us. We invest in them with our hearts, our hands, our equity, our sweat and blood, trying to make a mark, trying to leave something behind for those who come after us. Sometimes the temples we build are to ourselves even if hidden behind a facade of one kind or another. We build shrines to our own ego and sense of self-importance. Other times we build temples that are more altruistic in nature -- for the good of humanity or creation or community. We build temples to our families, temples to our careers, temples to our children, even temples in ministry. We can build

them with pretty impressive stones, too. We can build them high and strong and sometimes they will last a while, but eventually they will crumble and, indeed, they must crumble if we are to find a life built on something -- on someone -- more.

We hear this language in the Letter to the Hebrews which we have been reading for weeks now. Today it describes the cult built within the Temple that Jesus spoke of in our Gospel reading, and the problem is that -- as the reading says -- the sacrifices we make, the things we build, are never enough. Hebrews says, “Every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices, that can never take away sin [fully and permanently].” They had to go back repeatedly to try to make things right with God. The system of sacrifice was never satisfied.

Now, you may have never offered a burnt offering or sacrifice, but I am willing to bet that you have felt like no matter what you do, no matter what you say, no matter how much you give, that nothing you do is ever

enough! That's because it's not enough. What we offer and build just isn't going to do it, just isn't going to last.

That is why Christ shows up and does something for us that we cannot do for ourselves. We can keep trying, keep building, keep digging, but it won't last. We won't last. THEN Christ shows up and offers himself as the sacrifice. He is one who is without blemish. "A full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world" (BCP, pg 334) -- so we might have confidence to enter the sanctuary -- that is, to come before God, with a true heart in full assurance of faith.

We like to show up before God with our hands full of offerings, with all of our strivings on our backs, carrying the deeds to the temples we have built. But the message today is that all of that must fade away if we are to know the one who has done this work for us, who has written God's law on our hearts and in our minds, and removed the brokenness that had taken over.

How complete is this redemption that God has given us? Well, not only has Christ given himself for us, but the book of Hebrews also says that in Christ we have a Great High Priest from the order of Melchizedek. He is that intermediary between us and God and one another that nothing -- not even the temples we have built, not even the places and people that we think are holy -- will stand in the way of our relationship with God and one another.

So now we have this image of Christ as not just our Great High Priest, not just the lamb that was slain, but didn't Jesus say to his disciples that if you destroy this temple made with human hands then after three days God will build another, not made with hands (Mark 14:57, John 2:18-19, etc). They mocked him in the moments before his death on the cross, throwing these words in his face, not knowing that after three days in hell, a new Temple would walk out of that tomb replacing their priests, replacing their sacrifices, replacing their buildings with a new, Easter life.

A life that is not about who we know and the connections we make...

A life that isn't about the sacrifices *that we offer*...

A life not about the temples we build or that we get to point to...

But a life in Christ, who is our Sacrifice, our Priest, and our Temple,
now and forever more.