

“In My Father’s House”

Luke 2:40-52

One of the challenges in last few months is being able to see people in person. Something we took for granted a year ago has been much more difficult this year. Virtual meetings allow us to stay connected, but not in the same way. Even seeing someone in person makes it difficult to recognize or talk sometimes when both are masked up. Add in the usual Iowa winter gear we are all wearing now, and it’s hard to be together in person, face to face.

This is a challenge for us in the church, as well. While God is everywhere, and we can read our Bibles and pray wherever we are, being in the presence of God and the presence of others as we worship God is important. God comes not in just abstract ways, but in tangible ways. There’s a reason the Lutheran definition of a sacrament requires a physical element, like water, bread, or wine. We want to be in the presence of God.

In the beginning, God was with humanity face to face. Genesis says that God met with Adam and Eve face to face. They knew they were in the presence of God, they were able to be in the presence of God, and everything was good.

When sin entered the picture, that connection was severed. Sinful people could no longer be in the presence of the holy God. Something needed to happen.

When the Israelites were on the Exodus, they were commanded to build a tabernacle. It was a fancy tent that they set up everywhere they went. In it was the Ark of the Covenant, which you might know from the Indiana Jones movie. That contained the Ten Commandments, the staff of Aaron, and some manna. While they saw God do miraculous signs, and even lead them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of

fire by night, God gave them the tabernacle so they knew they were in the presence of God.

When the people of Israel were finally able to establish a capital and be at peace, God commanded Solomon to build a temple. It was a permanent house for God. It was where God’s presence would be. The people would only be able to go so far into the temple, the priests could go further on behalf of the people, but only one priest could be in the Holy of Holies. The people were comforted because they could see the temple, see where God’s presence was, and know that God was with them.

Again, sin got in the way. The people disobeyed God, refusing to worship God alone, refusing to care for the poor in their midst, refusing to welcome the stranger. So God’s presence left the temple. Eventually, even the temple itself was destroyed. The people were taken off into exile, with no sign of God’s presence. They felt abandoned by God, forsaken by God.

Even without the temple, God never left his people. Throughout their exile, God continued to send prophets like Daniel to show that he was with them. When the exiles returned to Israel, they rebuilt their houses, the city walls, and finally, the temple. The temple wasn’t anywhere near as splendid as Solomon’s had been, but it was a sign and symbol of God’s presence once again, and their renewed commitment to God.

When Jesus goes to the temple, God reenters his house. God’s presence returns to the temple, even if not everyone realizes it. When baby Jesus is brought to the temple to be named, Simeon and Anna see the importance of the event. They’d been waiting their whole lives to

see the Messiah, and both were old. Finally Joseph and Mary bring their baby to the temple to fulfill their obligations, and Simeon and Anna are able to share what God had promised them with Joseph and Mary and those around them. They rejoice that God's presence had returned to the temple.

The second time Jesus enters the temple, God's presence returning causes a bit more of a stir. Joseph and Mary and their family had come to Jerusalem for the Passover, as was their custom and tradition. On their way home, they discover that almost teenage Jesus isn't with them. Eventually they retrace their steps and find Jesus in the temple, sitting with the teachers and acting like a whiz kid, amazing them with his learning and understanding.

When his parents finally find Jesus, his mother asks him what he was thinking, in much the same way that any other worried mother would ask a child who had wandered off. Jesus' response, though, is anything but normal. "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know that I needed to be in my father's house?" Jesus doesn't say it to be cute. Jesus doesn't respond that way because he's a kid and doesn't know any better. No, Jesus says it because it's the truth. He needed to be in his Father's house. He needed to be there teaching, helping those who taught God's people learn about God and what they've been missing. The Word of God teaching the word of God to those who should know it.

Jesus would return to the temple throughout his ministry. He'd debate with the chief priests and the scribes. He would watch the people there, and commend the widow who put in her two last coins. He would turn over tables and chase the money changers away for keeping the people out of God's house, out of God's presence.

But Jesus wouldn't do his most important work at the temple. One of the most important things that occurred at the temple was the sacrifices. The people needed to make up, atone, for their sins, and had to offer sacrifices. Mary and Joseph offered up two turtledoves when Jesus was named. The perfect lamb was killed on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, for the sins of the people.

The most important sacrifice wouldn't happen at the temple, though. Jesus would die on the cross outside the gate, outside the walls, outside the temple. But Jesus did that so everyone would be able to enter into his Father's house. Jesus died on the cross so we could all enter into the presence of God.

The pandemic has made us change how we get together. It's even made us change if we even get together. It accelerated the drop in church attendance across the board. Not everyone wants to be in the presence of God.

But when we can't safely gather together in God's house, God doesn't stay confined. When visiting with shut-ins who are sad they can't make it to church, I usually remind them that even if they can't come to church, the church will come to them. That happens even more now.

As we wait and long for the day when we will all be able to come together in our Father's house without worry of disease, we rejoice that we are able to be in the presence of God because Jesus has ended the separations caused by sin and opened the way for us to be with God forever. What a wonderful promise.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church, Ames, Iowa
January 3, 2021