

Destroyed and Rebuilt

John 2:13-22

We know something about construction projects around here, of buildings torn down and buildings built up. During the last school year, the area around the church was full of construction noise. The sorority house next door was torn down, and then they dug deep down to put rock and other foundation materials. After the hail storms in the past couple of months, neighborhoods are full of houses getting new roof after the hail storms last year, and the church is waiting for a new one, as well. Ten years ago, the former First National Bank building and the former Campus Book Store building became holes in the ground, along with much of the block further west on Lincoln Way, and the apartment buildings that are there now went up in their place. Construction on the Cy-Town plaza continues to move along, with big plans for what that will bring to Iowa State and the Ames community.

All of these building projects take longer than three days. Most construction projects do. Even just remodeling projects can take longer than a few days.

That's why people have trouble understanding what Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem. It's the big city for those country bumpkins from up in Galilee, and they're amazed by what they see. Especially, they're amazed by the temple.

The temple of Herod was a vast complex, covering 35 acres. It was one of the most impressive buildings of its day. The Jews tell Jesus that it has taken forty-six years to build the temple. Construction was begun by Herod about 20 BC. The temple would finally be completed in 64 AD, only to be destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.

The temple was important because that was where the people could find God. It was the place where God's presence was. And yet Jesus wants to destroy it? First the renovation of tossing out the animals and money changers, then a full blown tear down? And the project could be completed in just three days? Jesus, the son of a carpenter, a builder, surely would have known better than that.

Jesus is cleaning out the temple is because the animals and what they represent are no longer necessary. The system of sacrifices established in the Old Testament were done because so many things made you dirty. The people needed to come at least once a year to offer sacrifices to make themselves clean. Priests also offered daily sacrifices on behalf of all of Israel, and the costs for those were covered by a temple tax, part of the reason the money changers were in the temple.

But the reason the sacrifices needed to be repeated was because they didn't work well enough. The sacrifices had to be repeated annually, if not more often, because the people couldn't stay clean on their own. They needed to make up for their sins. But the sacrifices didn't solve the problem. "For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:1-4).

The sacrifices were done to take away sins, but they couldn't do what they claimed to do.

Instead, Jesus came to offer himself as the one sacrifice for sins. He predicts what will happen here. Two years later, Jesus would be crucified at Passover, showing himself to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The one sacrifice that could work forgiveness for the whole world. The one sacrifice that would make all other sacrifices unnecessary. One sacrifice once for all.

Jesus wouldn't just replace the sacrifices in the temple, though. He would replace the temple itself! As a symbol of God's presence with his people, the temple when it existed was one of the most impressive buildings ever created. Yet it was destroyed by the Romans and remains in ruins to this day on one of the most contested pieces of land in the whole world. But Jesus changed that. Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus would tell the Samaritan woman at the well that the time was coming when people wouldn't worship God in Jerusalem or Samaria, but in spirit and truth wherever they were. God had come down to them to make His people clean.

The crowd surrounding Jesus missed that his return to the temple was when the temple had returned to its purpose. God was present in the temple, in Jesus, in God made flesh. They also miss Jesus' point. He's not talking about stone and beams being torn down or built up. He is talking about his body, the true temple where God's presence is found.

Jesus' remarks here will be a cause of his prediction coming true. When the chief priests are looking for how they can charge Jesus, the quote about destroying the temple becomes the charge the witnesses can agree to, and will lead to his death.

It is only after his death and resurrection that the disciples understand what he was saying. Jesus himself was God's presence in the temple. More than that, Jesus himself was the

sacrifice that would do what the temple sacrifices never could.

And here in John's Gospel, they would continue to demand signs. "By what authority do you do this? Show us a sign!" And Jesus had shown them signs. Earlier in John 2 was the story of the wedding at Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine. But here He promises a greater sign than that. He promises to raise up the temple in three days. But not the large stone structure that had taken 46 years to build. He was talking about his body, about his death and resurrection. That would be the greater sign than turning water into wine. This would be a sign for all peoples.

John differs from the Synoptics, the other Gospels, in a few ways. In John, Jesus teaches through long discourses, not through parables. The Synoptics locate the bulk of Christ's ministry in Galilee and then move Jesus geographically and thematically towards Jerusalem and His death on the cross there. John describes three different occasions when Jesus traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem before His last momentous trip, which is why we think Jesus' earthly ministry was three years long. The Synoptics report Christ's temple cleansing at the end of their stories, as one of the final acts that gets the chief priests to put their plan in motion to kill Jesus, but John records it earlier, here. In doing so, John highlights one of his dearest ideas—that Jesus is the new temple, where God was present with his people.

Building projects are a large undertaking. They take a lot of time and a lot of money, often more of both than was originally expected. Yet the payoff is usually worth it. Jesus' building project was definitely worth it. He died for us, destroying his body, the temple. Yet his resurrection shows us his new body, and what awaits us. Jesus brings the presence of God into our lives. What a wonderful promise.

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