

“Sacred Space”

(Matthew 24:1-2)

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Have you ever had a special place where you felt connected, maybe to God, maybe to other people? A place you felt had special meaning? I had a place like that when I worked in campus ministry in Switzerland years ago. It was in the back yard of a house my parents-in-law had near the mountains, just a big back yard and a hill, with an oak tree that had huge, spreading branches. I don't know much about oak trees, but it seemed like it was hundreds of years old, and I liked to sit under it in the summer and do my devotions or just watch the clouds drift by. It was a peaceful place where I felt God's presence.

This morning I want to think about place and make a couple observations about our text.

Do we need to go to special places to connect with God?

All around the world, Christians make pilgrimages, trips to places to try to connect with God. They go to places connected with holy people, or places where God did something special at one time or another. There were hundreds of places like that in Europe and around the world, shrines in France and England and Switzerland and Mexico. The three most important places were Rome, Jerusalem, and northeastern Spain.

The Reformers thought making pilgrimages was superstitious, and they ended the practice wherever the Reformation took root.

I think of the medieval town of St. Andrews in Scotland. The legend is that a monk brought the bones of Andrew the brother of Peter in the fourth century. Pilgrims from all over Europe would come to visit the church where the bones were kept. But when John Knox started preaching the Reformation, the church was ransacked and stripped of its altars, candlesticks, icons and paintings, and the relics of Andrew disappeared. Eventually they turned it into a quarry to use the stones for city building projects. Why? For the Reformers, God wasn't to be seen in the glory of an edifice, but in the beauty of a congregation who heard and followed his word.

So which is it? Where do we find God in the world today—in a holy place, or in a holy people? That was an important question for God's people in the Bible times.

Do we need to seek God in his house?

The temple in Israel was called the *Beit Hamikdash*, the “holy place” or sanctuary (Exodus 25:8), and was located on the mount in Jerusalem. It was the main place of God's presence among his people, where his *shekina*, or glory, rested in the physical world. The Scripture taught that God was everywhere, the creator of heaven and earth, not contained in a building. But nevertheless, he was with his people in a particular way in his temple. The Old Testament prophets talked about the temple as the place of God's mysterious presence.

Isaiah wrote,

“I saw the Lord sitting on a throne high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple” (Isaiah 6:1).

Jeremiah referred to the “throne of glory, high from the beginning, the place of our sanctuary” (Jeremiah 17:2). Ezekiel said about the temple,

“And there before me was the glory of the God of Israel, like the vision I had seen in the valley.” (Ezekiel 8:4)

God promised that he would meet his people there as they gathered for worship:

I will bring them to my holy mountain
and give them joy in my house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house will be called
a house of prayer for all nations. (Isaiah 56:7)

King Solomon built the first temple in the 10th century B. C. It was the center of Israel’s faith. Centuries later, Herod the Great started a massive remodel, and by Jesus’ time the project had been going on for nearly fifty years. It was one of the most magnificent buildings of the world.

But God’s people proved to be unfaithful, and they ran after other pagan gods. That’s why God allowed the temple to be destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B. C. The temple wouldn’t simply magically protect you from all enemies no matter what you did. If you broke relationship with God, his protection was removed, and the physical space was no protection any more. Finally, God gave Ezekiel a vision of the LORD removing his Spirit from the sanctuary, and Israel was carried off into captivity.

So something about the temple was special, and it was a place to connect with God. But you couldn’t break fellowship with God, violate his word, run away from him, then and somehow make it alright by going to worship. It didn’t work that way.

Jesus walks away from the temple.

After the temple destruction and captivity, a remnant of the people returned to rebuild the temple. Herod the Great started a massive remodel of the temple, and by Jesus’ time, the project had been going on for nearly fifty years. It was the place where Jesus visited, and it was one of the most magnificent buildings of the world.

When he cleansed the temple in Matthew 21, Jesus quoted God’s words to Isaiah:

“My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers.”
(Matthew 21:13)

He was saying, that was the vision, the gift of Israel’s faith for the world, but he said the leaders had corrupted God’s plan. That’s why Jesus chased the moneychangers out of the temple. And when Mark tells the story in his gospel, he says, “He would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts.” That gives us the idea that he stopped the priests making their way from the outer court into the holy place where blood was sprinkled on the altar.

If that's what happened, then Jesus was stopping the temple sacrifices for the first time in centuries. When he gave his life on the cross, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, he was saying other sacrifices no longer have any meaning or value.

In Matthew 23, Jesus took it further. He had harsh criticism for the whole religious system of Israel, and pronounced a series of woes on their hypocrisy. They were supposed to teach the truth of God, but they were keeping people from knowing him. Jesus had started his ministry with a series of eight blessings in the Sermon on the Mount, and he ended it with the eight judgments. Nothing is worse than claiming to know God while being far from his heart and keeping others from knowing him.

And at the end of that harsh chapter, Jesus lamented over Jerusalem,

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (Matthew 23:37-38)

Now he walks away from the temple, and he's never going back. In fact, this is the end of his public ministry. The temple leadership has turned its back on Jesus, and now he turns his back on the leadership and their whole system.

Imagine how confused the disciples must have been. The temple was the center of the life of Israel, the awesome place where God dwelled among his people. It was famous for its power and beauty. But Jesus says, "Do you see all these things? I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

God comes to connect with us.

The disciples can't believe it, and they ask for signs that it will happen. That's the cue for Jesus to teach on the destruction of Jerusalem, on the end times, and on his coming again. It's a telescoping of those future events. The Romans would destroy Jerusalem and the temple just forty years later, during the lifetime of many of the disciples. The other events will take place at the end of history. But I want to think about some of the lessons for us about how God dwells among his people. Not one stone was left in its place on another when the old temple was destroyed, but God is doing something new. He's saying don't base your spiritual life on this place, because it's all coming down.

That's why Peter wrote,

"As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 2:4-5)

So, you don't have to make a trip to Spain or Rome or Jerusalem to connect with God. Those might be great places to visit, but you don't need to go there to find God. You don't find God in Israel's sanctuary any more. You won't find his glory on the temple mount today. There's no more Holy of Holies. Instead, he shines most brightly in Jesus. Like Isaiah wrote,

"See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;
the one who trusts will never be dismayed. (Isaiah 28:16)

You want to connect with God? Then get to know Jesus. He said about himself, "I tell you that one greater than the temple is here" (Matthew 12:6). He paid for our sins. He gives us our strength and joy. And he assures us of our future, because he's coming again.

That's why Paul writes,

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is *in* you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

You don't need a special place to connect with God. You don't need to go to a sacred temple or church. He comes to live in your heart if you invite him in, and you find him in the midst of his people.

Temples don't last. Human traditions won't be around forever. So, we don't have to be impressed or overwhelmed with anything on earth except for God, who we see in Jesus. And we say yes to what he wants, because his voice is always good, his way is always life, and his presence in us is always truth and grace.