

Third Sunday in Lent March 3 2024

INTRODUCTION TO SEASONAL THEMES FOR THE DAY AND SEASON

Today's Gospel reading is set at about Passover time—a celebration of God's liberation of an enslaved people. This tradition goes back thousands of years. A much more recent tradition in some Christian Churches is to name this third Sunday in Lent Lataere Sunday—including a summons for Jerusalem to rejoice at God's comfort and liberating ways. Perhaps we're all called to look to God's unstoppable love as our hope for a wounded world.

GOSPEL John 2:13-22

13The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" 17His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" 19Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22After 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.

SERMON

Recently a visitor commented on the worship space of one of our buildings saying they felt as though they were being wrapped in a big, warm hug. Another visitor and family friend who had been hurt by experiences of intolerance dished out by churches in her life said she felt safe and calm in our space—and these remarks were made when the buildings were empty.

Folks in the congregation who aren't able to be in the building with us any longer frequently reminisce how our buildings contain memories of being community together, with special dinners, projects, weddings and funerals. Our places are the home for sharing laughter and tears.

The reality we face is that a core group of 20 people is trying to sustain large buildings and budgets from a time our congregations were much larger. *“How long can we go on?”*, we wonder.

A more worthwhile question would be *“What if we were intentional about using our properties to reflect the presence God both in a building and in a neighbourhood?”*

Mark Elsdon is executive director of a place that is church, apartment buildings and campus ministry at the University of Wisconsin Madison. He invites churches to see our meeting spaces in very different ways than we do now.

If congregations think of their buildings and land as assets they are stewarding rather than possessions they own, that mindset can help them transform church spaces for the community's well-being, he said.

“Gone for Good?” is a collection of 16 essays by practitioners in many fields that addresses the question of what happens to church property when a church closes. At its core is the argument that property should be viewed as neither an albatross nor a cash cow but rather an asset that should be thoughtfully handled and used for good.

And there are likely to be a lot of property transfers in the coming years: as many as 100,000 buildings and billions of dollars in church-owned property are expected to be sold or repurposed by 2030, according to the book.

(“How the Church can Serve Society by Changing How it Handles Property” in Faith and Leadership February 20, 2024)

It's that question of God's presence in a building AND the neighbourhood that brings us back to the Gospel reading today.

John's Gospel places the story of Jesus' confrontation in the Temple near the beginning instead of near the end as the other Gospel writers do. Commentators like Dr. Karoline Lewis, who literally wrote the book—actually several—on John's Gospel, says John's purpose for telling the story varies from the other Gospel writers too. John directly connects this story to the prologue where we hear the words "The Word became flesh and '*tabernacled*' or set up residence among us".

A generation after Jesus' earthly life, the actual Temple is reduced to rubble by the Roman Empire. The community hearing John's Gospel struggles with their own identity...how can they continue being who they are without their Temple—a centre of community? The Temple in Jerusalem is never rebuilt. Nevertheless Israel's people found ways to keep the faith and from that day to this. Even when Temples are sacked God finds a way.

Similarly, those who remembering Jesus' words about rising from the dead find strength knowing that when Jesus is publicly executed God finds a way— Through it all God finds a way to keep on blessing and saving the world. That is a story for telling at Passover. That is a story for telling in Lent. That is a story for telling at Easter. That's a story for us to tell and live every day.