

August 22, 2021
Thirteenth after Pentecost / Proper 16

Meditation: “The House That Hubris Built”

The year was, well the sources don't really agree what year it was – some say it was about 957 BCE (Before the Current Era), while rabbinic sources indicate it was definitely 832 BCE – and Solomon, King of the united kingdoms of Israel – to the north – and Judah – to the south – stood proudly in front of the newly completed temple in Jerusalem. His father, David, had build a sumptuous palace for the king, right next door and just downhill to the site of the future temple, but God had instructed him that he was not to build a temple for God – presumably because of his sins involving his next door neighbours, Uriah and Bathsheba – they were commandments 6 and 7, respectively, by the way. Now he, David's successor to the throne, had completed what his father had been commanded not to do – he had built an earthly home for God.

It was a marvel. It stood at the highest point of Mount Moriah, the highest point within the city of Jerusalem. Around the temple was a great courtyard in which all of the Israelites would gather for worship. Inside of a half wall of stone with a cap of cedar beams was the inner court, aka the court of the priests. In it were the altar of sacrifice where live offerings were slaughtered and their blood splashed on all sides of the altar. The animals were then either partially roasted and partially incinerated, with the roasted meat being shared by the priests, or, twice a day, they were holocausted – completely consumed by fire – except for the skins, which were shared by the priests. In addition to the altar and brazier were the Brazen Sea or Molten Sea, which was basically a large bathtub for the ablutions of the priests, and ten other lavers (wash basins). I imagine after a day of wrestling uncooperative livestock, slitting their throats, and incinerating them one would be sweaty, covered in blood, and stinking of burned flesh and fat, and a good bath would be welcome.

Beyond the court of the priests was the temple itself. It was deeper than it was wide, and was made up of three sections – the porch, with its two bronze pillars; the sanctuary, which was clad with intricately carved cedar, covered with gold, fir floors, likewise covered with gold, olive doorposts and fir doors; and finally the Holy of Holies. In the sanctuary were, amongst other things, a gold seven-branched candelabrum, a golden Altar of incense, and a table of the showbread, which was an offering to God. The innermost room, the Holy of Holies, was entered only once per year, on the Day of Atonement, when the high priest carried in the blood of a sacrificial lamb, and burning incense. This is the room that God's presence rested in. The room was about 30 feet by 30 feet (20 cubits by 20 cubits), was floored and wainscoted with cedar from Lebanon, and all of the cedar was covered with about 20 metric tons of gold. In the room were two olive cherubim, each 15 feet high, and with a wingspan of 15 feet. Side by side, their wingtips touched the wall on either side of the room and met in the middle of the room. There was also a veil of blue, purple, and crimson, made of fine linen. The cherubim were on a raised platform, and below them was the Ark of the Covenant, the chest that contained the two stone tablets with the Ten Commandments that Moses had received at Mount Sinai.

This was the temple that Solomon stood so proudly before on that day when the temple was to be dedicated. That temple stood for 410 years, until the Babylonians, after stripping it of all its gold and bronze, razed it, sending the message that their god had defeated the God of the Jews.

With God's only earthly residence gone, the people were taken into captivity in Babylon, an exile that lasted 70 years. Of that time the psalmist wrote, “By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and

there we wept when we remembered Zion.” (Psalm 137:1) The people were sure that, without an earthly home, God had abandoned them. But God had neither abandoned them, nor forgotten them.

Seventy years later a new king of Babylon arose – Cyrus. Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to the land of Judah and the city of Jerusalem and rebuild the city and the temple. And so, Cyrus became God’s anointed one, God’s messiah, God’s christ. (Isaiah 45:1) Work began on the city walls and the temple, but without financing, materials, or skilled labour, the work on the temple was slow. And then a new king of Babylon arose – Darius. And Darius provided financing and materials and skilled labour for the completion of the second temple. It was as grand as the one that Solomon had built about 500 years previously. The Jews dedicated the temple and restored their worship which revolved around the sacrificial offerings.

All was well, okay, all continued, more or less, until after a Jewish uprising was put down by the Romans in 70 CE. The Jews had been a thorn in the side of the Romans for years, and their patience had run out. When the insurrection was put down, so was the temple, including the enlarged courtyards that Herod the Great had completed during his reign. Not one stone was left standing on another. And let me tell you, the stones Herod had used to build the retaining wall for the earth he dumped in to expand the courtyard, those stones were the size of railway freight cars, or shipping containers. Once again, the Jews feared that God had abandoned them, and their worship was disrupted.

In early 2020 a virus threatened the peoples of the world. Places of public gathering were closed, including our sanctuaries. It felt sort of like being sent into exile where we could not gather and worship as we were accustomed to. And there seemed to be no apparent end to the exile. It felt almost as though God was abandoning us to the virus. Many mourned the loss of their weekly ritual, just like the Jews who sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept. The exile had a devastating effect on the spiritual and mental health of many. However, unlike the people of about three thousand years ago, we have telephones and computers and even Canada Post. The churches and temples and synagogues and mosques of our day discovered, if they weren’t already online, that they could continue worshipping via YouTube, Facebook Live, and Zoom. Sure, it wasn’t the same, but name one thing that hasn’t changed since March 2020. Sure, it wasn’t the same, but it beats complete and total isolation. And it hasn’t been all bad. People who would have been unable to attend in-person worship have been able to connect online or over the phone to our worship services. People who were not part of our traditional congregation, those who have never been to, and may never come to our buildings have joined us online. And at least some of those people have supported our ministry and mission with their offerings. And still we long to return to worship as it was in 2019.

When the second temple was razed by the Romans the Jews could no longer practice their form of worship. Without a temple, there was no place to make the sacrificial offerings; nowhere to slaughter the animals and splash their blood; nowhere to incinerate the flesh of those animals; nowhere to keep alive their relationship with God. And something new and exciting happened. Slowly at first. Then it became common practice. The Jews completely changed their worship from sacrificial offerings at the temple, to Rabbinical Judaism – Judaism that was taught by rabbis – in synagogues. Jewish worship changed from being a physical practice to practice of the mind. Instead of slaughtering animals, the rabbis told parables and explored the meanings hidden in the holy texts of the Torah, the prophets, and the writings. The Jews discovered that God had not abandoned them after all. There were other ways to maintain their relationship with God.

Just as the worship of the Jews was radically transformed at the end of the first century, our worship has been transformed and will be transformed again. When we return from Covid exile we will find that our sanctuaries are still standing. We will also discover that worship as we knew it in 2019 is long gone. At least initially we will have to maintain our distance from one another – sit where we are asked to sit, not necessarily where we want to sit. We will have to wear masks covering our chin, mouth and nose. We will not be able to sing corporately. We will not be able to respond corporately to responsive readings. We will not be able to have a choir or wind instruments or after worship coffee hour in the basement. And, we will not be alone in the sanctuary. There will be others, who are just as much a part of the congregation, who will be joining us virtually. We will integrate the in-person worship with the online worship services we have survived with for the last year and a half. And all of this starts at Dorchester United Church on September 12. Union United has not yet set a date for their return to the building. And, a note of caution, as happened last fall, this return could be short lived if the virus surges again.

And there will be one more huge change. As a half-time position we will only have the minister physically in our building every other week. The vision that arose at the end of 2019 was to not only have worship with the minister physically present every other week, but to also offer the opportunity to gather on the off weeks for virtual worship projected on the wall of the sanctuary. This would mean that we could gather for worship every week, even though we are only a half-time position. Under this vision, some of the options for the off weeks would be to join at home, to join together in the sanctuary – like we do at movie theatres, or to travel to the other church. The vision is just a starting point. What integrated worship becomes or what worship on the off weeks develops into is anyone's guess. What isn't a guess is the certainty that God has NOT abandoned us. Even though things have changed and are bound to change even more as we journey into the future, God is with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.