

## **“House of Belonging, Temple of God”**

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

10-25-20 Reformation Sunday/Stewardship Sunday

Based upon Ezek. 40: 1-5; 43:1-7a; Ephesians 2:19-22

Today is Reformation Sunday, a day set aside on the liturgical calendar for us to remember the bold and faithful disciples of Christ— Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, John Knox, and others, who 500 years or so ago helped to start the “Reformed Tradition,” the Protestant Christian tradition that we claim as our own. It isn’t just a day for looking back at ancient history, however; it is also a day for thinking about our future in light of our tradition’s motto: “Reformed and ever reforming according to the Word of God and the work of the Spirit.” That’s quite a remarkable motto when you think about it. Instead of priding ourselves on the fact that we will never reconsider perspectives and practices adopted centuries ago, our “tradition” says, “We are always changing, always evolving under God’s influence.” The only thing that is sacrosanct to us is that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. But everything else— how we worship and serve him, what it means to love our neighbors— is not etched in stone. This does not mean that anything and everything goes. We have a core set of beliefs which have lasted long enough that we can affirm decade-, century-, and millennia-old affirmations of faith in worship without squirming. But we also believe that the Bible is the living word of God, and that with the help of the Holy Spirit we are always growing and learning. Thus, openness to change is one of the ways we measure our faithfulness.

This year, more than in recent years, we have been living our motto in the extreme. We began the year in the ordinary way, doing the things we have associated with being and doing church for ages: worshiping together in the sanctuary, gathering for all-church potlucks, making meals for those in need, and teaching children how to read in elementary school. Then in March, we had to scrap most of that to do Church in a very different way, a predominantly virtual and much more distanced way than we have ever done before. It wasn’t on our radar or even our 5-year plan in February to learn how to live-stream worship or do meetings and fellowship events through Zoom. But led by the Spirit, we have learned how to do these things and will continue to do many of them even after we are back in the building. As we have stepped up our efforts to reach out to one another through calls and emails and do mission outside of the church building in new ways, we have also rediscovered a truth that the very first disciples knew, but that we have not really ever had to live: that the Church is not the building. The Church is the people and their witness and service. As the author of *Ephesians* put it, in Christ, who is the cornerstone, “the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” (Eph. 2:21-22). We, all of us here today, are the Temple of the Lord. So, for months we have proclaimed that the Church is not closed; it is just going about its business outside of the building.

I believe this and am proud of the way that we have lived this. But the “you” in this text is plural not singular, which tells us that the author was not trying to say in this particular passage that each one of us is individually a Temple of the Lord, so much as that collectively we all are. That gives me pause because it’s our togetherness that has really taken a hit these last six months because we can’t gather as one in the building. Our mission statement affirms that we are

“a community gathered by God’s grace sharing God’s love with all.” We still are a community in spirit. But there is something special about being a visible community in a physical way. When we are scattered each in our own homes, it can be harder to feel that we are a part of the same community, and even to feel the presence of God. This building isn’t sacred and it isn’t God, but it is a place where sacred things happen, and where we have long come because we know that here we will find a point of connection with God and with a loving community. It is a house of belonging and a dwelling place for God. So, I stand before you today conflicted. I am both proud of how reformed and ever reforming we are and have been, and how we have continued to be the Church without a building, and also missing the gathered community and the way that this place, as well as its people, proclaimed to the world the truth of God’s love and presence in Jesus Christ. Maybe you miss it too?

The prophet Ezekiel missed the gathering place that had been the dwelling place for God for centuries for his people when he was cut off from it. The text we heard this morning records a vision that Ezekiel had after he was in exile in Babylon, and after the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. He knew that God didn’t die when the building was destroyed because in an earlier vision, he saw God’s Spirit safely leaving the building. But for Ezekiel, who was the only prophet who was also a priest, worshiping in exile was not nearly the same as going up to the house of the Lord that felt like a home away from home to him as well. His relationship with God was very much tied to worship and the building, both of which the Babylonians had robbed him of when they conquered Judah. So, it’s not surprising that while he was in exile dreaming of the future, he started dreaming about when a new Temple would replace the ruins of the old, when proper worship would be restored, and when all the world would again know that the Spirit of God was in that place. His vision of the Temple was very specific, so much so that we almost never consider Chapters 40-43 in worship because detailed blueprints don’t easily preach. But after you slog through all the measurements in these chapters, you get to the climax of his vision, which we heard in Chapter 43, when God moved in and life and worship were restored as they should be after the exile.

That’s an image I want us to keep in mind today because it is not just Reformation Sunday in the life of our denomination, but also Stewardship Sunday in the life of this particular church. Now if you have attended worship for any length of time here at Prince of Peace you have heard enough of my stewardship sermons over the years to know that Christian stewardship is not really about giving to a church budget, although a portion of our pledges does go to that. We don’t say, “Here is our asking budget, please meet this with your gifts,” like the fundraisers on the radio, nor do we do as many Jewish synagogues do, which is find out your annual income and assign a percentage to you as your dues each year. Stewardship has nothing to do with membership and everything to do with faith. As Christians, we give first and foremost because we are made in the image of a God who gives. Therefore, we cannot be our best selves or worship our true God if we do not. We give because, like our Jewish ancestors before us who gave their first fruits and 10% of their resources to God, we see it as a way of remembering that all that we have ultimately is God’s, and because we believe that God has blessed us with the expectation that we will share our blessings with others in God’s name. We give because doing so guards us against the real temptation in our society to worship money more than God, and because we trust in God’s provident care. We give because we are disciples of Jesus Christ who

gave his very life to save us, and told us before he did that the two greatest commandments were to love God with everything we have and our neighbors as ourselves. Even if there were no church building we would give because that's what you do in the kingdom of God, and that's where we all want to dwell— with God in God's realm.

There are so many different biblical and spiritual reasons that we give. But this year, one of the reasons does have to do with the physical Church and its ministries. We give because we have learned during this very difficult time how much our world needs a visible Church. This is a place where people can come when they are looking for God and community. It is a place where, as a spiritual house, we can do more to serve the ways of Christ and our neighbors in the world together, than we can on our own. As our founding father John Calvin put it, “[T]he church is Christ's kingdom.”<sup>1</sup> The time will come some day when there is no longer a need for the building to demonstrate that Kingdom to the world. In the *Book of Revelation*, like Ezekiel, John of Patmos dreamed of a beautiful new Jerusalem. There was no Temple in his dream because in that dream evil and sin had been defeated, and God dwelt amidst the people. It's a lovely vision, but we aren't there yet. We are caught somewhere between Ezekiel's time, when they believed God needed a Temple in Jerusalem, and *Revelation's* future when all the world will be at peace and dwell in and with God in grace. We are caught in a time when in order for us as a people to be the Temple of the Lord, as *Ephesians* put it, it helps to have a house of the Lord, a place where the community is visible and God feels accessible. And as poet David Whyte put it, “There is no house like the house of belonging.”<sup>2</sup> This is what the church building is— a house of belonging, and goodness knows after all this time having to be distant from strangers and family alike, we need to feel belonging more than ever in order to heal us of the anxieties caused by isolation.

I don't know when this time of exile will end. But it is already clear that whenever it does, the Church will be needed more than ever for its witness too. We will be needed to model to our divided nation how to embrace reconciliation and live in unity in diversity, valuing all people regardless of skin color, sexual orientation, gender identity, political persuasion, education, immigration status, and more. We will be needed to help feed and clothe those who have lost jobs and family members, and care for immigrants and offer grace. We will be needed on so many fronts. We can do these things individually now and are doing these things as best as we can around pandemic restrictions. We are still worshiping and serving. But we will be able to do more when we can gather together. So, as we prayerfully consider how much of our time and talent and resources we can and should pledge to the Church and its ministries this year, I hope you will keep all of this in mind. As author Steven King put it, because “Giving is a way of taking the focus off the money we make and putting it back where it belongs— on the lives we lead, the families we raise, the communities which nurture us.”<sup>3</sup> This church is a community which nurtures us and so many other people through its ministries. The post-pandemic future needs it to be strong and vital.

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin, John, *Institutes*, 4.2.4.

<sup>2</sup> Whyte, David, “*The House of Belonging*,” in *The House of Belonging* (Langley: Many Rivers Press, 1998), 6

<sup>3</sup> Stephen King, *Scaring into Action*, an excerpt from a speech delivered at Vassar College commencement, May 20, 2001, Beliefnet, <https://www.beliefnet.com/love-family/charity-service/2001/06/scaring-you-to-action.aspx>.

In Chapter 47 of Ezekiel's vision of a post-exilic Temple, his angel tour guide takes him to the entrance of the new Temple and shows him that there is a river which flows out of the Temple to the south and the east. (Ez. 47:1-12). The water that flows to the east goes down into the Dead Sea and makes those stagnant waters fresh again. Fish begin to flourish in the revitalized waters, bringing people who are hungry for work and food. Fruit trees also grow by the banks of the river. The angel explains, "Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing." (Ez. 47:12). I love that image of living, life-giving water flowing out of the sanctuary and transforming both Creation and the community with new life after being stagnant and dead for so long.

Think of what will flow out of Prince of Peace if we, the Temple of the Lord, invest in this house of belonging and dwelling place for God. There will be resources to feed the hungry and support those who are worried about utility shut offs and evictions, or who are living in shelters without homes. There will be music— and in God's time singing— because we know in this church how music can connect us with the Spirit, and how worship helps us understand God and feel God in new ways. There will be compassion— for those who are struggling, for those who have been told they were unworthy, unwanted, or broken, for those who are searching for a kind of Christian witness which is about love and not hate. There will be education for all ages and an openness to questions so that seekers and long-time members, age 2 to 100, can all continue to have their faith reformed by God's wisdom. There will be care for Creation and a dedication to making the world a better place. We carry this living water in our hearts now. It keeps us going and feeds those few we are allowing ourselves to be near. But when we can come together it will overflow and splash out onto the streets all the more because we are stronger together, and have learned during this time that the building cannot and must not be a barrier to faith and grace. This is what you are investing in when you invest in Prince of Peace.

"But what about me?" you may be thinking if you are one of the many who have become vital members of this community online. "I live out of state and may never come to your building." If you invest in Prince of Peace, you are also ensuring that the life-giving waters which flow from the church will continue to reach across the world to wherever you and others are. We have no intention of ending our live-streaming worship even when we can go back into the building. But we will need better equipment to make it easier to make the two forms of worship work out of the same sanctuary. We will continue to provide pastoral care to and prayer for all in and outside the building, and to offer classes that are accessible here and in the virtual world too. Investing in Prince of Peace ensures that our ministries will continue to grow and evolve in ways which reach more people not less. We have learned the importance of this and want everyone to know that they belong in God's community and God's Kingdom.

*Psalms 63*, which was supposed to have been written by David when he was in a wilderness exile time of his own begins, "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirst for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live...." (Ps. 63:1-4a). We have learned and are still learning during these strange and difficult times, that God dwells with each

of us. But to find and seek God in the sanctuary is to behold God's glory in a powerful way. So, let us ensure that God can always be found here so that we can carry God out there. We know that we have been blessed by the Lord. Now is the time for us to bless God in return by sustaining the Church which ministers in God's name. May the Spirit be with you as you discern over the next few weeks how to do this, and why we do this, for the glory of Christ our Lord. Amen.