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St. Stephen/Our Saviour
Lent 3
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Sisters and Brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, in ancient Judaism, the Temple was everything.

The Temple was the focal point of religious life.

Indeed, ancient Jews from all over the nation of Israel would make periodic pilgrimages to the Jerusalem to worship at the Temple.

Particularly at the time of Passover, families made the trek to Jerusalem, changed their Roman coins for Jewish coins, purchased a Lamb, and celebrated Passover with the many other families gathered there in Jerusalem, each with their own lamb to celebrate.

It was in this respect like our Thanksgiving holiday, only they were using lambs, while we use turkeys.

PAUSE

Besides being the focal point of religious life, the Temple was also understood to be the residence of God here on earth among God's people.

The Temple was God's house.

Sure God's glory filled all Creation, both heaven and earth, but for the people of Israel, the Temple was God's specific abode with them.

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Furthermore, the Temple served as the place where the treasury of the state was housed.

The wealth of the Jewish King and his kingdom was stored in the Temple.

The Temple was the depository of the King's treasures because it was considered the safest place to store the treasures, very much like a bank.

The Temple was considered inviolable, since it was where God's presence abided. So, of course, the King kept the nation's treasures there.

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Interestingly enough, the ancient Jewish people also considered the Temple of Jerusalem to be the highest place on earth.

It isn't, of course.

But that is how the Jewish people understood the geography of Jerusalem.

And so in the Bible, whenever the Jewish people are travelling to the Temple in Jerusalem, no matter the direction from which they were travelling, they were said to be going UP to the Temple.

And likewise, whenever the Jewish people are travelling from the Temple in Jerusalem, no matter the direction they were travelling heading, they were said to be going DOWN from the Temple.

We do a similar thing in the modern day, except for us, it is dependent on the direction.

If we are travelling north, we might say, "We are going UP to Maine this summer."

If we are travelling south, we might say, "We are going DOWN to Florida."

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So, yes, the Temple was everything to the Jewish people.

And over Jewish history, the Temple went through several iterations.

The first Temple was built by King Solomon in the 10th century B.C.

It was known appropriately enough as Solomon's Temple.

But this Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 6th century B.C.

The Babylonians conquered the southern part of Israel, known as Judah.

The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, including the Temple, and exiled many of the Jewish inhabitants to Babylon.

But then, less than a century later at the end of the 6th century B.C. the Jewish people returned from exile, and they rebuilt the Temple.

This then was the second iteration of the Temple, and it is sometimes referred to as Zerubbabel's Temple, because he was the chief political officer there at the time of the restoration of the Temple.

However, this Temple was subsequently desecrated by the Greeks in 325 B.C. and then again by the Romans in 63 B.C.

It was then Herod the Great, who was responsible for restoring the Temple yet again.

Herod, though, went well beyond just refurbishing and repairing the Temple.

He covered the entire Temple in gold, and built an enormous platform around the Temple.

And it is this iteration of the Temple, Herod's Temple, with which Jesus would have been familiar.

And it is this Temple, Herod's Temple, that would be destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D., never to be rebuilt again.

PAUSE

Now it seems, at least according to the Gospels, that Jesus predicted the destruction of Herod's Temple.

We even have some semblance of Jesus' prediction about the destruction of the Temple here in our gospel reading today.

Jesus says, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up."

A similar declaration appears in Matthew and Mark's gospels.

John is the only Gospel that clarifies that Jesus is speaking about his body, even though that is the assumption in Matthew and Mark as well.

And it is quite interesting that these Gospels make this leap from the Temple that was made of stone, to the temple that is now Christ's body.

So what is going on here? Why begin to speak of the Temple as Christ's body?

Well, it begins to make sense when we realize that all the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—were written after the destruction of Herod’s Temple in 70 A.D.

And the question no doubt arose? What now?

If the Temple was everything, what do God’s people do now, now that the Temple is no more?

And for some Jewish groups like the Sadducees, whose identity as a group was completely wrapped up in the Temple, they disappeared. No Temple, no Sadducees.

For other Jewish groups, like the Pharisees, the synagogue takes precedence after the destruction of the Temple.

Synagogues were strewn throughout Israel and beyond, and served as gathering places for devout Jews to study God’s law.

But, for the early Jewish Christians, and specifically the Gospel writers, the answer to the question, “What to do now, now that that there was no Temple...

For the early Jewish Christians the answer was Jesus.

Jesus was the new Temple.

Now, we don’t know if Jesus actually said, “Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up,” after all Jesus was crucified 40 years before the destruction of the Temple.

We don’t know if those are the words of Jesus, or a literary invention of the Gospel writers, who were trying to give spiritual guidance to the people who were wondering how they are to conduct their religious lives with no Temple to speak of.

Not that this much matters, whether these are Jesus’ words or a literary invention that came later.

PAUSE

But here is the thing. And it is this what is most important.

The Temple was the symbol of God's presence here on earth with God's people, right?

But the Temple was also symbolic of the people's service toward God.

For this is what the PRIESTLY system and the ritual SACRIFICE was all about—the people serving God at the Temple.

You see, the ancient Jews believed that God needed to be fed, and the slaughtering of animals, and subsequent burning of those animals on an altar at the Temple, was the way God was fed by the people.

The altar, you see, was the transport station.

As an animal carcass was burned up, the carcass decreased in size, and the smoke was carried up to heaven.

The animal then was understood as being transported up to God.

Makes sense in terms of what the ancient Jews observed happening there on the altar.

And so God received by way of the altar, the transport station, his share of the food.

And the people themselves also enjoyed a nice bar-b-que as well, with what remained of the burnt-up animal carcass.

But first and foremost the sacrifice was for the purpose of feeding God.

And also the taking care of God's house, the Temple, seeing to the incense being burned in the Temple, that the candles are lit in the Temple, etc., all this was also the role of the priests, again all for the purpose of serving God.

The priests in this way were almost like house servants.

PAUSE

So here we have God's people serving God, almost as if God can't do for himself.

But then this script gets flipped when the Christians begin to speak about Jesus as new Temple.

Suddenly it is not about God's people needing to serve God, as much as it is about Christ serving us.

Jesus himself, says as much, "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve."

The script was flipped.

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Now truth be told, the ancient Jewish faith was already beginning to rethink the priestly system and the ritual of sacrifice, well before the first Christians entered the scene.

At least some ancient Jews were rethinking the priestly system and the ritual sacrifice.

The prophet Hosea, in chapter 6, verse 6, for instance, proclaims the word of the Lord saying, (this is God speaking), "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

And again, the Psalmist in Psalm 51:16 writes, speaking to God, "For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased."

And yet again, in Proverbs 21:3 we read, "To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice."

The ancient Jews were already rethinking the Temple sacrifices, before Jesus appeared on the scene.

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But what is the point? What is the message we are to take with us, by the idea that Jesus is the new Temple?

Just this, that sometimes the greatest gift we can give to someone else, is allow them to give to us.

Sometimes the greatest gift we can give to someone, even to God, is allow them to give to us.

It is true of our human relationships, sometimes we should allow others to give to us, even though that is difficult to do.

We don't necessarily like the idea of being catered to.

We like to do for ourselves. We don't like to feel dependent.

And we like to feel useful, which is probably why the ancient Jews felt the need to serve God.

But there is great spiritual growth in just being open to receiving the goodness of God.

It teaches us what grace is.

I often think that this is what the season of Lent is all about, recognizing that as much as we might think we can do for ourselves, that we can heal ourselves, that we have some grandiose part to play like the ancient priests, ultimately we have to let go, and let God, as the saying goes.

And therein we find grace. Let go, and let God.

Again, it is difficult to come to that revelation.

But there it is. That is grace.

And this no doubt is what the early Jewish Christians discovered when Jesus said that he is the Temple, that unlike the sacrifice humans had made for God, Jesus is now the sacrifice made for us. The sacrifice made for us on the cross.

And so, we receive this grace in Lent at the cross, and we receive this grace every day when we allow God to serve us, and in this way we are giving the greatest gift we can give to God.

Yes, sometimes the best gift we can give to another, is to allow them to give to us.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.