

“Called to Be . . . a Temple”

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Part of a periodic series, “Calling Ourselves Names”

For Bethany United Church’s 174th and Elora United Church’s 182nd anniversaries

Ephesians 2:8-22

October 22, 2017

See the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

When the apostle Paul told the Ephesian Christians about a temple, everyone knew what he was talking about.¹ Temples were everywhere.

Paul had been to Athens, that great city of culture and learning. Wherever he walked, there was a temple to this god, that god, this god, that god.² Paul knew temples.

This letter he wrote to the Ephesians . . . he’d already been to that city. (Ephesus is in Turkey now.) He had seen their famous temple of Artemis. Artemis was a very important god. The Ephesians fancied that they had a special relationship with Artemis. Over many centuries they had built, then rebuilt, then rebuilt again Artemis’ great temple. It was one of the wonders of the ancient world.³ The Ephesians knew temples.

Of course, people of the Bible know Jerusalem’s Temple best. Today, the Temple Mount is the most hotly-holy, tensely-treasured 37 acres in the world. In Paul’s time the Jewish Temple still stood there.⁴ For him and every other Jew, including the first Christians, it was *the* place of offering and sacrifice to God, *the* centre of God’s cosmos, *the* place where God’s heaven and God’s earth meet. Temples were everywhere, but God’s People knew the Jerusalem Temple was the only one that mattered. Because God is the only One who is truly real.

Paul knew this Temple! But what he wanted to tell the Ephesian Christians, and what we need to hear, is about God’s New Temple.

II

God the Holy Spirit gathers us, and people throughout the world, and our ancestors and our descendants across the generations, and the Spirit makes something new. We call it “church.” In the Bible it gets called different things. Every so often, usually on Anniversary Sundays, I’ve been taking one of those things the church gets called, and looking at it. What does that name tell us about who God is making us to be? And what God is giving us to do?

I started with *koinonia*, a Greek word that means a community sharing life together. That’s who we are. We’re an *ekklesia*, another Greek word for a gathering that’s come to do

¹ For simplicity, I’m assuming that Paul wrote the Letter to the Ephesians. I am persuaded that it was written either by him, or a colleague/student of his who was familiar with and faithful to his theology.

² Acts 17:13-34.

³ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_of_Artemis and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artemis>.

⁴ It was the second Temple, constructed in the late-6th century BCE after the Jews returned from exile in Babylon.

public business together. That's who we are. We're a bride, married in an intimate relationship with Jesus. We are a heavenly choir, singing for God's delight. We are an embassy of ambassadors, representing Jesus to the world. We are a household, a peculiar sort of family.⁵

And, today, the church is a temple, the New Temple that Paul was talking about.

III

The church is a temple unlike any other.

This Temple we're talking about is not built by a great king, like Herod who built the Jerusalem Temple.⁶ Nor is it built by a proud city, like Ephesus built the one for Artemis. Nor is it built by intellectual and cultural elites, like the ones in Athens. This New Temple is built by the Holy Spirit. God's power and presence, creativity and crafting, makes this Temple.

The Spirit builds this Temple we're talking about on top of Jesus. He is the "cornerstone." When building a foundation, a mason sets the cornerstone first. All other stones are placed in relation to this first stone. The cornerstone determines the whole building.⁷ If we rest on anything else, if we are not oriented by Jesus — who he is and what he has done — then we will be disastrous. We will fall apart.

This Temple is spiritual, because it's the Holy Spirit's work. But not "spiritual" in the wrong sense of wispy or otherworldly. This Temple we're talking about is not made of marble, limestone, brick, or lumber. The stones the Spirit is using are real, they are concrete, they are fleshy . . . they are us. People! These living-stones start at the foundations with the apostles and prophets, who first brought the Good News of Jesus. From them, the Spirit has continued adding living-stones all along through the centuries. The Spirit keeps building it, adding more and more of us. The Spirit continues to find new living-stones, often tossed aside and rejected ones, often cracked and brittle ones, weathered and worn ones. These are perfect for the Divine Stonemason to add to the Temple.⁸

Temples are often put up to celebrate a victory. The nation's god has won it a great battle,

⁵ The previous sermons in this series are: "Sharing Life" (October 21, 2012), "A Public Display" (October 20, 2013), "Jesus Gets Married" (March 23, 2014), and "A Heavenly Choir" (October 19, 2014), "An Embassy" (October 18, 2015), and "Calling Ourselves a Family" (October 23, 2016).

⁶ Herod the Great is known in the Bible as the frightened monarch who hunted for infant Jesus and murdered the young boys of Bethlehem (Matthew 2). He had a terrible reputation for killing those who were closest to him too. He was a puppet of the occupying Roman government. Many Jews regarded him as ethically, ethnically and spiritually unfit to rule. Yet, he was also a great builder. Under his direction the Temple was extensively renovated and expanded in the last 1st century BCE, such that it was known as "Herod's Temple" (even though it was by that time already half a millennium old). This was the Temple what Paul and Jesus knew. It was destroyed by the Romans in the ill-fated Jewish Revolt of 66-70 CE.

⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornerstone>

⁸ Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, Ephesians, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2002), 128.

people think, and the temple is a monument to that. The Spirit's Temple is a monument to a victory too, God's victory that matters most.

Timothy Gombis sums it up like this: *"God has acted powerfully and radically in Christ to begin setting the world right. He has defeated the powers that have hijacked God's world, holding it in their enslaving grip. God is freeing people from death, transforming their lives, uniting humanity in Christ, and building the church as a monument to his victory over the powers of evil."*⁹

That's a great summary of the Good News of Jesus. The Spirit is building us to celebrate what Jesus has done.

As we embody God's love in how we are with each other, and how we are with others . . . as we show in our lives God's defeat of sin and evil . . . as we seek justice and sow mercy . . . as we live peace so that communities flourish . . . as we steward God's creation so life thrives . . . as we are agents of truth, forgiveness and repentance towards reconciliation, beginning with ourselves . . . we are a monument for our neighbours of what Jesus has done.

Remember, Jesus is our Cornerstone. What shape of a cornerstone is he?

Cross-shaped.

That's how he did it, his victory that we're a monument of. On his cross. So how we build on him is with the self-giving, peace-making, enemy-loving, cross-bearing love of Jesus. Then, we are a living, breathing monument to him . . . his Temple.

IV

Temples bring people together. They are gathering places. What excited Paul so much was that in Jesus' New Temple there were Jewish living-stones and Gentile living-stones being brought together. They'd been fundamentally divided. Now the Spirit was bringing them together in Jesus.

But this Holy Spirit Temple also spreads out. It's not in one place. It's everywhere that Jesus' People are. We are the stones, and wherever we are, the Temple is. So Jesus' Temple is all over this town. It's all over this county, all over this province, all over this country, throughout the world. In each place it looks different, because the stones are different, the people are different. It's incredibly multi-coloured, multi-cultural, beautiful.

Above all its other functions, the Jerusalem Temple was about one thing: God's presence. The Holy One, the Creator, the Caller of Abraham and Sarah, the Rescuer from slavery, the Redeemer of Israel . . . the Temple was the heartbeat, the sign that this Holy God was with God's People.

⁹ Timothy G. Gombis, The Drama of Ephesians: Participating in the Triumph of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 85.

So what about this Temple that we are?

For someone this week, maybe you — a living stone of God's Temple — you will be a sign for them that God is present.

Maybe you — a living stone of God's Temple — you will carry to them God's promise that they are not alone, that they are not hopeless, that they are not unforgivable, that they are precious and treasured by God.

Maybe you — a living stone of the Temple built on the Cornerstone — you will be a monument to Jesus' victory for them.

Maybe you — a living stone of the Temple the Spirit is still building — you will be the invitation that they can be part of the Temple too.

That's the Good News of Jesus. Thanks be to God.