

“Lord...Prepare Me”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
March 4, 2018**

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 56:6-8

New Testament lesson: John 2:13-22

Everyone pull out your cell phone. Go ahead; humor me. From now on at church, you're going to have to leave your cell phone behind. It won't be with you for the hour or two you spend here.

Forget about the technicalities – where you'll leave or how you'll get it back. Just know that there will be one or two hours of your life each week separated from your cell phone, or your tablet or computer, or whatever.

How's that strike you? Not a very comfortable feeling is it? We're kind of attached to being connected. Well, fear not, I'm not at all serious about this. I don't care if you're connected to your tech device at church or not. But Jesus might. If your cellphone, computer or tablet keeps you from those quiet times when we can connect with God like no other, than Jesus has a message for you: “Stop making my Father's house a market-place!”

You can take that message however you like – by text, voicemail, or typed onto your soul like a divine email from the Lord. The way I take it when Jesus talks about clearing the temple is not so much about being in church as it is about being in our own skin, our own heart. Jesus is the new Temple of God – the house of God – and by extension, we are each a temple to the Lord, body, mind and soul. God lives and moves in us.

To ensure that we feel God living and moving in us, we need to make room for God, to set aside worldly distraction, to enter into some quiet time just between you and the Lord. One place we do that is here in church – thank you by the way for not using your tech devices during worship. And there are lots of other places we can enter into quiet contemplation of God's presence in our lives, and even spend some time listening to God rather than doing all the talking.

There is your commute time to work or wherever – no texting, remember, and setting aside phone calls while driving wouldn't be the worst idea. There is also supper time, particularly if you eat alone for with just one or two others. Mindfully eating our meals can be a great way to experience God's presence – just as we mindfully receive Communion, which we'll do here in a little bit.

There is prayer and meditation, walks in the woods or around the neighborhood, even approaching household chores and projects mindfully can be time spent with God. The point is, stop making every moment of your life a worldly exchange of some type – messaging and managing, planning and judging, fixing and fidgeting. Set aside a time and place or activity that’s just between you and God, and be receptive to God’s voice, God’s presence. Not easy for us to do.

And it wasn’t easy for the people of Jesus’ time, either. Just like us, they too felt unease about being alone, disconnected. All the way back to the beginning of time, people have been fearful of being alone, and disconnected particularly in this wild and unpredictable world we live in.

So to experience God most fully, the faithful Israelites of Jesus’ day visited the Temple which was in the heart of old Jerusalem. In the heart of the temple – within its innermost sanctuary – was the “Holy of Holies,” where only the high priest was allowed.

In the heart of the “Holy of Holies” – separated by partitions and curtains – sat the Ark of the Covenant. In the heart of the ark was the throne of God; the mercy seat, they called it. The kapporeth or “mercy seat” was a flat slab of gold resting atop the ark, with no statue of God, no image that can capture God’s presence, and no activity technological or otherwise to distract from being in the presence of God. Just a widening circle of peace, and quiet, and presence – being present to God.

This is why Jesus – when he saw the Temple court full of hustle and bustle – cattle and sheep and doves being sold to the masses, money changers doing business with visitor from other countries, and no doubt eating and drink and messaging filling the air with a cacophony of noise and activity – when Jesus saw this pushing in upon the Holy of Holies, he drove it all away with an uproar, sent everyone running and put everything at peace again.

And with that, the people could once again approach God in the empty space that Jesus created, experiencing the Lord like no place else, putting God first above all else -everything else-in their lives – in our lives. In other words, the most sacred space where God was in the midst of the Hebrew people was empty. What the Israelites carried with them through the wilderness and protected with their lives was a seat with nothing on it, but everything in it.

To go to Jerusalem to visit God, was to visit empty space – the divine emptying and divine silence of the divine space. It is exactly because there was no gilded statue or talking idol

that the Israelites were able to experience the living presence of God's holiness in their midst. And so it is with us.

Only by regaining the sanctity of silence can we hope to hear God speaking to us, speaking to our hearts and souls. Why is silence so hard for us? Are we afraid to listen for God, to enter into quiet spaces with God? What kind of noise have we let into our "temples" in order to avoid listening to the quiet that is God's voice? What stuff do we hold so closely to hearts that we can't experience God's presence? In our churches, do we let committee meetings, financial figures and Sunday school lessons keep us from pausing to listen for God's voice?

In our families, do we let busy schedules, old grudges, and bad habits keep us from spending time with God, drawing near to the heart of God? In our work, hobbies or volunteering, do we let concerns about getting it right, being first, and making the grade turn our priorities upside down. In our schools, do we let peer pressure, insecurity and fear keep us from putting our faith on the line and standing close to Jesus, close to God?

In our communities and the world around us, do we let prejudice and despair drown out the God's voice?

The answer, of course, is yes – we too often fail to experience and embrace God's presence. We are too distracted, too fearful, and too vengeful.

That's why Jesus calls us to clear the temple of our heart and soul and find a time and place to continually renew our relationship with God—a relationship that forms and shapes all our other relationships, all that we are.

Let us all take some time this Lenten season to set aside the distractions, let go of our fears, and walk away from our misconceptions, that we might draw nearer to God. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Lord, how often we have filled our lives with “hustle and bustle.” Forgive us, O Lord, for trying to fill the temple of our bodies, our souls with things not of your Spirit.

May we be aware of the difference between “dead silence” and “living stillness.”

May we be spirituality filled by the holiness of your Divine Presence, that we would see you in each other, thereby transforming our lives into living worship unto you.

It is in your name that we pray, raising our eyes to heaven and our voices in song, praying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.**

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.