

REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

JOHN 2:13-22; MARK 13:1-2

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Let me tell you a parable of sorts. Each summer we vacation in New Hampshire. We go to Lake Winnepesaukee – the biggest of the central New Hampshire ice-age lakes. Just north of Winnepesaukee are the White Mountains, the largest of which is Mt. Washington.

I like to think of God at the time of creation scooping out those lakes from the rocks and earth like a child at the beach, kneeling digging with both hands building up a mountain range as he went along.

Mt. Washington is the largest peak east of the Mississippi. It is the first land mass to rise up against all that cold arctic air that blows down upon New England and upstate New York from the North Pole.

There is mystery and awe about Mt. Washington. Many people have lost their lives climbing the mountain in spring or fall ill-prepared. Some of the highest wind recordings ever have been at the summit where the National Weather Service has a station that is literally chained down with huge, iron/link chains that go right over the top of the house.

Lots of things in the lake and mountain region are named after Mt. Washington. But probably the most appropriate is the largest ship that sails on Winnepesaukee. It is an old steamer, parts of it built in the 19th century. It boasts huge diesel engines that reverse when the “Mount” as we call her is docking. You can feel the earth move under your feet, as Carol King used to sing, when that ship comes in.

The Mount is a fearsome ship. Carrying hundreds of people to their destinations around the lake. You see, the ship isn't the mountain but something of the spirit and size of the mountain is in the ship.

The point for this morning is that the temple in Jerusalem is to God as the ship, the Mt. Washington, is to the mountain called Mt. Washington.

Solomon's Temple, like a big lake steamer, expanded by Herod literally sprawled over one whole quadrant of the old city of Jerusalem. Its tiers and walks layered upon each other, not unlike that big steamer/ship, building like a birthday cake to the holy of holies at the top.

At the foundation are the huge forty-foot stones that comprise the Wailing Wall on the west – where Jews still come for catharsis and consolation to mourn the destruction of the Temple in 70AD and other life woes.

Now the Temple isn't God, just like the ship isn't the mountain, but it has the spirit of God in it. In fact, that was the understanding of the temple in ancient Hebrew culture – a house for the Spirit of God.

The problem is that the temple is a human creation. So that by the time Jesus arrives the Temple has become a business center. A place to conduct trade and commerce. A place that had little of the awe and mystery and sense of holiness that that Temple had originally when Solomon built it.

So Jesus takes on the Temple establishment. He tells them to their faces that the Temple will be destroyed. But God will raise it in three days.

You can imagine that really confused and angered them. Put them on the verge of hysterical laughter. How could this temple, this national icon – like our Statue of Liberty – that took 46 years to build, how could this great structure be rebuilt in three days?

But you see Jesus wasn't talking about Solomon's Temple. That Temple was not the point. The point was the place where God resides. Sometimes a stone building, sometimes a human life. You can't hold the Spirit and Power of God down. You can't tie it down even with huge iron chains. So if the Spirit of God decides to reside in a human being and not in the big stone temple so be it. Done.

Jesus is the new temple. God completely and fully resided in Jesus and when they tried to destroy Jesus God would raise Jesus in three days. But that's only the beginning. Any follower of Jesus who decided to live like Jesus and carry Jesus' teachings in his or her heart is also a place where the Spirit and Power of God resides.

Don't tell me about great stone buildings or vast global enterprises – the first trans-national corporation was the church. If God doesn't reside in them, they don't matter. God resides anywhere, anytime God decides to reside.

Stone buildings, international organizations come and go. The Spirit of God is unchanging. It resides where there are open hearts trusting souls.

Let me bring this closer to home. I believe God is rebuilding our temple here at Westminster. The old structure is crumbling – our reliance on a big investment portfolio.

You see, we relied more on those stock investments than we did on God. Each year the gathered members of this church, by and large, relied on a handful of wealthy members under Dr. Butzer or later on a large investment income as the driving force of mission. Those days are gone, those stones are crumbling.

But we are letting go of that old structure. We are saying it's up to us now, each one of us. If you can give 5 dollars a week or 50, all of us now are being used by God to drive the mission of this church.

It is a critical time in the life and history of this church. We've been saying that now for the past two years. We are actually making up for about 147 years of poor stewardship. 147 years of trusting that someone else will do it.

Those ten or twelve people Dr. Butzer took to the Buffalo Club for lunch then passed the hat or the bequests they left from which we took year after year until the stock market stopped growing three years ago. It was a wake up call. We knew then if we continued to give at a per capita pace among the lowest in our Presbytery we would be out of business in a few years.

We reversed that trend last year. But we need two more years like last year to make up for 147 years of trusting in someone else or something else other than Spirit of God in our own hearts. The old habits didn't take overnight to acquire. They won't go away overnight. But two or three years seems reasonable to me. Don't you think so?

You and I have a clear choice. We can play small or we can play big. Back in New Hampshire a few summers ago we were sitting on the porch overlooking the bay and the most amazing sight appeared. Coming down the lake was a miniature Mt. Washington. An exact replica of the big Mount only ten times smaller. 20 feet instead of 200.

The captain of that Little Mount was sitting somewhere in front of the miniature smokestack. All you could see was the captain's head poking out from the birthday cake tiers of the little steamer.

The outsized adult in the miniature boat. It was cute to be sure and charming. Even funny. We laughed and waved as it sailed by.

You see, either we can downsize and diminish the church. Make it into a charming miniature of its former self or we can believe in an awesome and powerful God.

A God who resides when and where she chooses. A God who transforms and rebuilds and renews.

How do we choose which church to be? For me there is no question. The little ship is cute but if I want to get from one end of the big lake to the other I won't waste my time on the little replica. I'll take the big boat any day.

We live in a city and at a time in the life of this city and world crying out for a real church – not a little replica of its former self.

The only way to get there, Friends, is for you and me to let go of relying on the phantom members of this church who are better able to give than you and I are. Those people who can afford more than me. The only way for us to be a big church and not a little replica church is to let go of that endowment we hear so much about and think will be there to bail us out if we don't make the budget again this year.

Believe me...those phantom members don't exist and that endowment is gone. It's up to us to open our hearts and invite God to take up residence. Make of our hearts a new temple worthy of housing the mysterious and awesome power that created the universe. The same power and Spirit that lived in Jesus and conquered the darkness of death.

If we all do that we will rebuild a Temple here at Westminster that would inspire not only old Solomon in all of his glory but Charles, Elliot and Jacob Morse who we baptized a minute ago.

Now I ask you, what greater satisfaction could you and I hope for than to inspire our children to live big and believe big and give big – like those first followers of Jesus when the chips were down and they had nothing more to do than trust!

Isn't that the legacy we are called to pass on to the next generation? Isn't that the kind of faith you aspire to embrace? I know I do. Amen.