

“Anabaptism@500 - The place of worship”

Ezekiel 40:1-4; 41:1-4; 43:1-7a (August 27, 2023)



Today we come to the second in a series of sermons. Our Anabaptism@500 Bible Study Group examined three passages of scripture earlier this year. Now we'd like to share with our whole congregation some things we learned. Of course, I'll be adding my own thoughts too.

And, just the same as last week, we've printed a sheet with the comments we developed, for any who would like to reflect on them during the week. You can pick that up in the foyer after the service.

Did I mention that these passages were *not* of our choosing? The passages our group studied were randomly assigned.



Ezekiel chapters 41 and 42 are lists of measurements. There's no characters or storyline to make it interesting. It's one of those parts of the Bible that could almost put you to sleep ... unless you know how it fits into a bigger picture.

So for our reading today, I've given you just a small snippet of the measurements. And I've bracketed those measurements with some other verses that will place them in context. We'll talk more about that in a few minutes.

When we first read through these chapters we thought, “These don't look very promising.” When we came to the end of our sessions, however, we were delightfully surprised! Something that held out little hope turned out better than we'd thought.



I've often wondered how much fun it would be as an architect to design a great building. When I was in High School, I took a course in drafting. We drew mechanical parts, including different perspectives and measurements.



But the part I loved the most was designing the floor plan of a house. It was my chance to be creative. To dream of a building I could live in, laid out exactly the way I wanted. At the end, we even printed our designs as professional blue-prints. How cool was that!

More recently, Lindsay and I reconfigured our kitchen. I was drew on that previous experience by sketching out a design, and taking measurements to see where all the appliances, countertops, table, chairs and other furniture would fit. I enjoyed that!

But what does that have to do with anything?

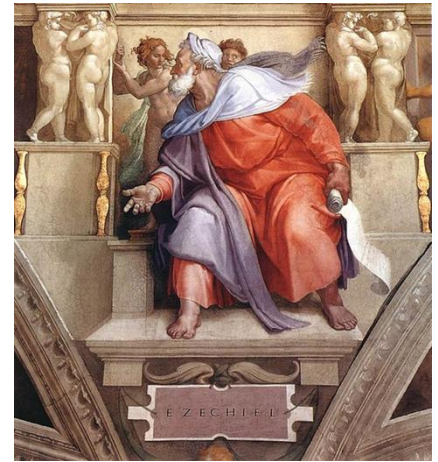


Well, let me tell you about the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel was not only a prophet, he was also a *priest*. So the temple in Jerusalem and the rituals of worship were very important to him.

Ezekiel lived in a dark time of Israel's history. Not long after he was called to speak God's word to the people, the Babylonian Empire laid siege to his beloved city. Soon Ezekiel was sent to live as an exile in a foreign land.

There he ministered to others who suffered the same fate. And in the first few verses we read this morning we hear how Ezekiel received a *vision*. God brought him to a high mountain with a city to the south. In other words, while living in exile, Ezekiel was given a vision of *home*.

"A man was there, whose appearance shone like bronze, with a linen cord and a measuring reed in his hand ..." (Ezekiel 40:3) Ezekiel was outfitted with tools for measuring, and told to declare what he saw to the house of Israel.



Ezekiel, painting on ceiling of Sistine Chapel, by Michelangelo (1475–1564)

25 years into exile, and 14 years after the city itself was destroyed, Ezekiel was given a vision of a temple rebuilt, of ruins *restored*. Imagine that! The temple was nothing more than a pile of rubble, torn down by a great empire asserting its domination and control. But Ezekiel saw *beyond* that. He saw who's really in charge. And it's not the one who appears so intimidating, who destroy and laid waste and inflicts such terrible human suffering.

Ezekiel sees beyond the chaos of what he understands to be God's judgement, to glimpse the coming of God's *salvation*, and the astounding gift of God's grace.

Now can you think of a dark time in your life? A time when everything was in ruins, yet you imagined a return to wholeness? A time beyond suffering ... to restoration? When have you been in that place? When have you seen the goodness of God?



I am struck by how *earthy* and material Ezekiel's vision is. He sees the re-construction of a building. The re-shaping of bricks and mortar. And that is what gives him hope.

We are earthly creatures, created from dust. We live in *this* world. And somehow it helps to know that God is very much interested in this world too. In our flesh and blood. In the stuff of life, the material of our existence.

For the ancient Israelites, the temple was a sign of God's presence here on earth. It wasn't just another building, but a holy place.



Of course they knew that God was *beyond* time and place. When Solomon offered his prayer of dedication for the temple, centuries before, he said: "Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27)

Still, *that* house was the place where God would choose to grace God's people, receive their offerings, hear their prayers.

We are, of course, *spiritual* beings. But that God-given spirit is contained in these *earthy* bodies that are frail, and glorious, all at the same time. Because all of it is from God. And somehow architecture, buildings, art, music, food and drink, touch and taste – all these things that appeal to our physical senses – they convey the grace of God. They are signs of God's goodness and God's presence in our midst.



Yorkminster Cathedral

Who hasn't walked into one of the great cathedrals of Europe and not been inspired? Or listened to a beautiful piece of music and not felt a shiver go down their spine? Who hasn't looked upon a glorious sunset and not felt it was a gift from God? Who hasn't received bread and wine from the communion table and not felt the mercy and love of Christ?



That temple was important to Ezekiel. It was a *holy place*. We give shape to our buildings. And the truth is they shape *us* as well.

What about this building? Have you ever thought about that? What does it say about who we are and what we value?

Built in the late 1950's it was the sign of a people who had prospered in a new land. They'd outgrown their old building, and they could barely fit in this new one.



I see that we still value it. It's well maintained – because it is the Lord's house, and therefore a reflection not only of us, but of the God we worship. I see banners, which speak of themes that are important to our faith. I see quilts, that speak of practical service to others.

I see musical instruments: a piano and organ, and large choir loft. They point to our love of music. I see an elevator and cut-outs in the pews for wheelchairs, which speaks of our desire to welcome all kinds of people. It's a good place. A place we come to sing and pray and eat and do God's work, and listen for God's voice.

How long have *you* been coming here? 1 year, 20 years, 60 years? What does this place mean to you?



Could we live without a building? Yes, of course!

Remember I told you last week about always interpreting scripture through the lens of Jesus? Jesus warns us about placing too much emphasis on any building.



Christ and the woman of Samaria, by Pierre Mignard (1612–1695)

Do you recall his conversation with a Samaritan woman? She wanted to know where was the “proper” place to worship.

“Our ancestors worshipped on *this* mountain,” she began. “But you,” recognizing Jesus as a Jew, “you say the place where people must worship is in *Jerusalem*.” (John 4:20) So where is it? Samaria or Judea? *Here* on Mount Gerazim, or over *there* on Mount Zion?

Jesus says we are to worship in *spirit* and in truth, wherever that place may be.



So then, who needs a building, you ask? Who needs a temple of any kind? Why not take a walk in the woods? Why not skip church and commune with Jesus on the golf course?

Well there’s just one thing. There is no *gathered community* on the golf course.

So while I have no doubt that Jesus will be there, what’s missing is the rest of God’s *people*: The sound of others singing and praying right there beside us. The friendly smiles, the handshakes and acknowledgements. The laughter, and tears sometimes, followed by a warm embrace.



God calls us to worship in the *community* of God’s people, and anything less than that is impoverished.

You know what I missed most during those long days of pandemic, when all of us were isolating, and none of us were able to gather here at church? I missed being with people. I missed the worshipping community. And yes, we found other ways of meeting ... through video, by telephone. Thank goodness. For some of us they *continue* to be a lifeline and a necessity. But it’s not quite the same.



For the people of Israel, the Jerusalem temple was, and still is, a visible sign of God’s presence. The place where God has chosen to come and meet with them. A holy place of prayer.

When Ezekiel shared his vision of the temple being restored ... when he laid out the plans, measuring the dimensions of every room, it was a message of incredible *hope*. Never had a simple set of blueprints held so much promise! Every little “cubit” was a sign of great expectation.

To top it off – and this is the climax of his vision – Ezekiel saw the *glory* of the Lord, the Shekinah, return. “He brought me to the gate And there the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east; the sound was like the sound of mighty waters; and the earth shone with his glory.” (Ezekiel 43:1-2)

“The spirit lifted me up, and brought me into the inner court; and the glory of the LORD filled the temple.” (Ezekiel 43:5) A temple’s not much good without God’s presence, is it?

“He said to me: Mortal, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet, where I will reside among the people of Israel forever.” (Ezekiel 43:7a)



So where do you encounter God? Where does the Divine Presence, the glory of our Creator, reveal itself to you? Where is *your* holy place here on earth? I pray that we will be open to God’s presence in *all* kinds of places! For the earth is full of the glory of God.

And here too, in this building, in the community of God’s people. We remember Jesus’ promise: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Matthew 18:20)

A place of worship. God desires to meet us right where we are. In all our earthiness. In the midst of our flesh and blood. In exile or distress. In hope and in joy. In *every* circumstance of life. God comes to us, and meets with us, and gifts us with God’s love and mercy.

God wants to meet with you this day. May you be ready to receive the living, loving God. Amen.

