



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Place Where God Will Live

Ephesians 2:11-22

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In today's Old Testament lesson we hear King Solomon praying at the dedication of the temple. The temple was finally completed and Solomon gathered the elders of Israel at the tabernacle, where they offered sacrifices too many to number. Then with the priests leading them with the ark of the covenant, they processed up the mountain to the temple. When they'd placed it in the holy of holies, the presence of the Lord, the *shekinah*, the cloud of his glory descended to fill the temple as it once had the tabernacle. And Solomon prayed. He prayed for the new temple and he prayed for his people. He prayed that they would be faithful. And then, our lesson today, he prayed for the foreigners, for the gentiles who might come to the Lord's temple having heard of his great name, his mighty hand, and his outstretched arm—that coming to the temple, they would know his glory. Solomon's kingdom was, however imperfectly, a fulfilment of the Lord's promise to Abraham to make Israel a light to the nations. And the nations came to Israel and to Solomon, because they saw and because they heard of the Lord's reputation. Not only had he blessed his people, but in him they saw a god unlike their own. And so they came, and they saw for themselves the goodness of the Lord, the God of Israel. And Solomon knew, too, that they would come to the temple that he'd built. So he prayed that when these foreigners came and prayed, that the Lord would answer them, that he would make himself known to them, so that "all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel." Again, this

wasn't some one-off prayer that Solomon came up with. Solomon's prayer is rooted in the promises of God and in the story of his people. Solomon knew that the world is not as it should be; Solomon knew the Lord's promises to set it to rights; and Solomon knew that God had given an integral role to his people to bring the fulfilment of those promises. And Solomon great desire was for his people to be faithful to that calling, to that vocation—faithful to be a temple people.

Now, this imagery and idea of the temple wasn't new with Israel; it goes all the way back to the beginning of the story. The garden was God's first temple. And the man and woman he created—he created them—us—to bear his image. That means to be his representatives in the temple, to serve him, and steward his goodness to the rest of creation. We rejected that vocation and the story ever since has been about God restoring his temple and his people. Two weeks ago, when we looked at Ephesians 2:1-10, we saw how Jesus—the one in whom God and humanity have come together—represents God's work to restore his temple, but we also saw there that, as Paul stresses so much, what is true of Jesus is also true of those who are *in him*. One day his people will be raised to be like him—heaven and earth people—but in the meantime, God has filled his church—filled us—with his Spirit as a foretaste and a down payment of that hope. Brothers and Sisters, that means that we, purified by the blood of Jesus and filled with God's Spirit, we're now the temple—not a temple of bricks and mortar, but a temple of people filled with God's presence.

Just as Solomon prayed that the nations would know the glorious reputation of the God of Israel through his people and come to meet him at his temple, our prayer, our desire, our commitment ought to be that the world will know God's glorious reputation through us and come to meet him here. What God promised to Adam and Eve,

to Abraham, to Moses, to the people through the Prophets is now reality in us. The promise isn't completely fulfilled. One day the knowledge of the glory of God will fill the earth. On that day the new creation that began when Jesus rose from the dead will come to full fruit. Creation and us with it will be made fully new. God will wipe every last remaining bit of evil from the world and sin and death will be no more. But, Brothers and Sisters, here's the really important thing here: The church—you and I and everyone else who is in Jesus the Messiah—we are God's vehicle to get the world to that point. *The church is God's means of making his glory known until it fills the earth.* And that ought to get us reflecting on how faithful we are to our mission. When the world looks at the Church, when it looks at Christians, does what we say and do and live declare the glory of God: his great name, his mighty hand, and his outstretched arm? (To put it as Solomon did.) Does what we say and do and live give the world a desire to come to the church to meet God? Do we at least make the world constructively curious? If not, we need to reflect on our priorities and on what we're doing.

And this is true of everyone who is in Jesus the Messiah, but Paul, writing to the Ephesians who were mostly gentile believers, wants to stress to them just how significant it is that through Jesus and the Spirit they have been made a part of this temple people. Brothers and Sisters, this is something that we don't spend enough time talking about and reflecting on. For Paul, the unification of Jews and gentiles in the Messiah was at the heart of the gospel. It was the proof that God was fulfilling his promises. This church, made up of Jews and gentiles, men and women, rich and poor, slave and free, all together, unified, one body was a testimony to the glory of God. In fact, for Paul, it was *the* testimony of the gospel's power.

And I don't think it's even on the radar for many of us today, because we've become so used to and even so complacent about divisions within the church. Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, Mennonites, Romans, and Eastern Orthodox—and those are just some older divisions amongst us before we got really split-happy in the last century or two. And it's not just theology and polity. I suspect Paul might have at least a little sympathy for those sorts of divisions, especially over serious, gospel-compromising theological matters. But Paul would be furious to see how we divide over things like language and ethnicity. The English are here and the Germans are at that Lutheran church and the Swedes at that other Lutheran church and the Italians and Spanish and Filipinos are at the Roman church and the Greeks at the Greek Orthodox, the Russians at the Russian Orthodox, the Ukrainians at the Ukrainian Orthodox, the Syrians at the Syrian Orthodox. The Dutch are in their Reformed church and the Scots are in *their* Reformed church. And there's a church just for Chinese-speakers and another for Afrikaans and so on and on. And you've got Messianic Jews forming their own synagogues. And Paul would be shouting at us and asking, "Haven't you read a single thing I've written to you? Your divisions are undermining the very gospel you claim to preach!"

Paul did not want this to happen in the Ephesian churches, but even more than that, he wanted the people in those churches, especially he wanted them to appreciate just what God had done for them in Jesus and the Spirit, because if we understand what God has done to make us *one*, we'll hopefully be far less likely to let it be *undone*. So, Paul writes in Ephesians 2:11-12 and reminds them of what they used to be: "Therefore, remember this: In human terms—that is, in your 'flesh'—you are 'gentiles'. You are the people whom the so-called circumcision refer to as the so-called

uncircumcision—circumcision, of course, being something done by human hands to human flesh. Well, once upon a time you were separated from the Messiah. You were alienated from the community of Israel. You were foreigners to the covenants of promise. There you were in the world, with no hope and no God."

You were gentiles. Of course, Gentiles didn't think of themselves that way. They were just regular people; it was the Jews who were weird. But the fact that Paul can say this to them, "You were gentiles" means that they've now been brought into the family of Israel. And just in case they might have forgotten the significance of that, he describes them as having been outsiders with this string of descriptors that work up to a crescendo of alienation.

First, they were *separated* from the Messiah—from the rightful King. The Messiah was some weird thing the Jews were into. What would Greeks or Romans—who were oh, so superior—want to have to do with him? And even if they did, the Messiah wasn't part of their story. Then second, Paul says that they were *alienated* from the community—the *commonwealth* as the King James puts it—of Israel. They were foreigners. Israel was not their nation and Israel's God was not their God. Even if they did see something attractive in Israel and went to the temple in Jerusalem—think of Solomon's prayer for the foreign visitors who would come—there was a wall between the court of the gentiles and the court of the women. In Paul's day there was an inscription on that wall warning that foreigners passed it on pain of death. Gentiles could look from a distance, but they were cut off from the living God. And third, they were *foreigners* to the covenants of promise. Most of them had never heard of Abraham or Moses, but if they had, that simply wasn't their story and it certainly wasn't their family. They didn't belong there. Whatever promises the

God of Israel had made, those promises were not for the gentiles. And Paul then sums it all up and says: You were in the world without God and without hope.

I think Paul intends a bit of irony there. When he says they were without God he uses a word that essentially means they were atheists. And "atheist" is exactly what the gentiles called Jews and the first Christians. Because Jews and Christians worshipped only one God and one God might as well have been no god to them with their vast pantheons. And Jews and Christians refused to take part in the pagan worship and festivals that ran all through gentile life and society. And so Paul flips it around. "No, it was you gentiles, separated from the Messiah, alienated from Israel, foreigners to the covenant promises—it was *you* who were the atheists. You were the ones without God. And because of that you had no hope. And if being called atheists didn't make an impact, I have to think this would have. Because it's not that the Greeks and Romans didn't understand the idea of hope; it's that they had no reason, no grounds to live with hope. No one in their world believed in progress the way people do today. That idea is rooted in our biblical heritage. They thought things just went round and round in cycles—forever stuck. And while their philosophers might talk about life after death, it was all very vague and not hopeful at all. Hesiod imprisoned hope in the bottom of Pandora's box, lost forever. Aristotle and others wrote about hope as fickle and treacherous—a foolish thing to trust in. Things could go wrong just as easily as they could go right. Hope just wasn't a big deal for the Greeks. But in stark contrast, hope was at the centre of the whole Jewish and early Christian worldview. As I said last time, no one in the pagan world would have ever dreamed that the gods loved them or even really cared about them, so why would anyone in the pagan

world have reason to hope? So Paul sums it all up: Without God and without hope, the gentiles were alone and lost in the world. Paul reminds them just how bleak things were for them before they were captured by the gospel. I think it's a good thing for us to reflect on this ourselves and if we did, I think we would have a greater appreciation for what God has done for us and for what he has made his church.

So after painting this bleak and pitiful picture of where these people were before Jesus, Paul cuts through the hopelessness and despair. Like he did with that great, "But God!" in verse 3, now in verse 13 he practically shouts out, "But now!"

"But now, in Messiah Jesus, you who used to be far away have been brought near by the Messiah's blood. He is our peace, you see. He has made the two to be one. He has pulled down the barrier, the dividing wall, that turns us into enemies of each other. He has done this in his flesh, by abolishing the law with its commands and instructions."

Paul wrote about the Messiah's blood back in Chapter 1. Jesus' blood is the means through which God has accomplished redemption and forgiveness. This was the great, once-and-for-all-time sacrifice that the Old Testament sacrificial system was pointing to all along. In the Old Testament, sacrificial blood was like a disinfectant. It cleansed the tabernacle and later the temple; and it cleansed the people of Israel so that the holy God could come to his people and dwell with them. Pagan sacrifices were all about killing valuable animals to placate the gods. In Israel, the sacrifices were all about the blood—a symbol of God-given life—and that blood was shed to wash away the stain of sin and death so that God could come and dwell and fellowship with his people. Brothers and Sisters, the blood of Jesus, shed at the cross, has fully accomplished once and for all

and for everyone what the Old Testament sacrifices did partially and temporarily. And in doing that, God has abolished the law.

You see, the law was the thing that set Israel apart from the rest of the world and Paul saw that wall in the court of the gentiles as symbolic of it. The law, like that wall, kept the gentiles out of God's people, out of his covenant, and out of his promises. The law marked out the gentiles as idolaters and as unclean—unworthy of God's presence. But Jesus' blood has washed us clean—Jew and gentile alike—making both the law and the wall that kept the gentiles out irrelevant. In Jesus, God had brought these Greek believers into the family—fully and no longer aliens and foreigners. And why? Paul goes on in the second half of verse 15:

"The point of doing all this was to create, in him, one new humanity out of the two, so making peace. God was reconciling both of us to himself in a single body, through the cross, by killing the enmity in him."

Do you remember the first thing the risen Jesus said to his disciples when he entered that locked-up house where they were hiding after he'd been crucified? It was "Peace". *Shalom*. Peace is what the world looks like set to rights. And so it makes perfect sense that "Peace" would be the first thing Jesus would say to his disciples after rising from death and inaugurating God's new creation. He'd just begun the work of setting the world to rights. And for Paul, this new humanity—Jews and gentiles, once divided by the law, but now brought together—this new humanity, the church, is the first sign of God's peace breaking out into the world. The church is the sign of the new age. As I've said before, we are God's working model of his new creation. Jesus has killed the enmity that was once between us and he has reconciled both to God and, through that, to each other. Jesus' blood as washed us clean

and Paul stresses regularly to his fellow Jews, this means there's no longer any reason to consider gentile believers in Jesus to be unclean. We gentiles, with hearts renewed by the Holy Spirit, have turned away from our idols to serve the living God and by the blood of Jesus he has washed us clean. And if there's any doubt, Paul would point to the fact that the same Spirit has come to fill the gentile believers who first filled the Jewish believers. So he goes on in verse 17: "So the [he Messiah] came and proclaimed peace, to you who were far off and to those who were near. Through him we both have access to the Father in one Spirit." Again, it's all the fulfillment of God's promises. In Isaiah 57 God had promised that he would heal the broken and humble in spirit and give peace: peace for those far off and peace for those who are near. He's now done that in Jesus and the unity of the church—these people who were once separated, these people who once hated each other—their unity in the Messiah as one people is the proof, the testimony, the witness of God's faithfulness and the power of the gospel.

And Paul, again, wants to drive this home. Look at verses 19 to 22: "So then [—this is the result—] you are no longer foreigners and aliens. No, you are fellow citizens with God's holy people. You are members of God's household. You are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Messiah Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole building is fitted together, and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. You, too, are being built up together, in him, into a place where God will live by the Spirit."

The point of all this is that through Jesus and the Spirit, the living God has welcomed us into this amazing story. We've been adopted into a family that was not ours. We were poor, dirty refugees without hope, but God has washed us clean in the blood of Jesus, he has made us welcome members of

his family, and most importantly, he has come to dwell with us. He has filled us—aliens, foreigners, strangers, gentiles—with his Spirit—the presence that he had promised to his own people and in doing that he has made us holy. And just because. God has a purpose for us. He always has.

And this is where Paul stops hinting at things with temple language and imagery and comes out and says it: God has done this in order to establish a new temple. For centuries the Jews had been waiting for God's presence to return to the temple, not that unlike the way so many Jews today go to the Western Wall and pray for a new temple and God's return. Brother and Sisters, Paul's stressing that God *has*, in fact, returned, that he has built a new temple, and that he now dwells with his people. But not in a stone building on the mountain above Jerusalem. He has built is new temple and returned to live with his people through Jesus and the Spirit.

And, again, that means that we—the church—are God's ongoing means of fulfilling his promises to set creation to rights. God's presence with us is the sign that one day his presence will fill all of creation. We are the temple, the working model of new creation. As we proclaim the gospel, we proclaim the glories of God to the world. As we live the gospel, we put on display the glories of God to the world. And our unity in Jesus and the Spirit—something we've often forgotten—is one of the most important ways we ought to be living out the gospel. Just as there was one temple in Israel, there is only one church. By our divisions and schism and arguments, by our elevating language and race and nation over the gospel, we've often obscured this reality, but Brothers and Sisters, there is but one church and the unity of that one church across our natural divisions of language and race—and class, and status, and every other way the world divides and separates us—

that unity is meant to be a witness. A witness to the power of the gospel. A witness to the power of Jesus and the cleansing power of his blood. A witness to the Holy Spirit who indwells every believer. And most of all, witness to the faithfulness of God, who has been true to his promises. And through that, our unity becomes a witness to a bleak and hopeless world of God's coming new creation—not just of the world set to rights, but of humanity set to rights within it: one people, renewed and purified, in fellowship forever with the living God.

Let's pray: Gracious Father, you have purified us by the blood of your Son and filled us with your Spirit to make us your temple. Pour out your grace that we might be faithful stewards of the gifts you have given us. Teach us to guard the unity of your church, so that the nations will see in us a witness to your mighty hand, your outstretched arm, and your great name. And when they draw near, hear their prayers, we ask, that they might know your great name as we have, through your Son and through your Spirit. Amen.