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Sermon Series: I Believe in the Holy Christian Church

This Sermon: God's Temple (Eph 2,19-22))

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“I wanted to be somebody. . . to be part of something big and important.” That was a short written message left by a teenager on a suicide note. The relatively brief life of the young man revealed various attempts to become part of something “big and important.” The use of drugs was a part of it and so was flirting with membership in a street gang. Tragically, the youth never became the “somebody” he wanted to be, so he ended his life. On the one hand, what that teenager wanted is really what all of us want too. A Rockefeller Report on education revealed what is perhaps the obvious: people want to live lives that mean something, that have a higher significance and purpose beyond merely existing. We want to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

For the past six Sundays we have been treating various Bible descriptions of the Holy Christian Church, the sum total of all believers in Christ everywhere. We have seen how the Bible uses a variety of terms and rich picture language to bring out just how special, how valuable, how important, and how incredibly blessed the Holy Christian Church is. When we are members of this church we ARE part of something big and important – and we have distinct purpose and meaning for our lives. This morning we conclude this sermon series with a focus on one more Bible term and picture, that of God's Temple. We are the temple of God.

There are actually a number of Bible sections that present this portrait of the believing community, but here I'll read only two of them. First, there is Ephesians 2:19-22: **You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.** The second section that uses the same imagery is 1 Corinthians 3:16-17: **Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.**

This rich imagery emphasizes a number of features about the Holy Christian Church. What is a temple? The basic dictionary definition is that a temple is a place of worship, dedicated to some deity. It is a special building or structure that is devoted to some exalted, usually religious purpose, invariably involving some kind of worship. It is not a place designated for athletic contests like a gymnasium, or a place of commerce like a bank or marketplace. It is a place where people in their relationship with their deity are front and center. The Bible not only impresses on us that our very lives are centered in the worship and service of God, but that God actually lives within us, within our human bodies. The God whom the heavens and earth cannot contain, the God who is larger than the entire universe with all its galaxies and unfathomable space, this God chooses to dwell within his people, in each and every one of them. Jesus said in John 14, “**If anyone loves**

me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” And Paul with equal clarity writes, **“You yourselves are God’s temple and . . . God’s Spirit lives in you.”**

Did you notice Paul’s first words when he began to describe us as God’s temple in Ephesians chapter 2? He says something very significant. He says, **“You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household”** and being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives. At one time we were anything but suitable material for use as temples of God. Elsewhere in this letter to the Ephesians Paul gave graphic descriptions of the way they and we used to be. **“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”** We were “without Christ and without hope in the world” alienated from God and in active rebellion against him. Hardly suitable temple material for the Lord to use as a dwelling place! Maybe its worth saying that these Ephesians, the first recipients of this New Testament letter knew the concept of sacred temples quite well. In their city of Ephesus stood one of the “seven wonders of the ancient world” – the magnificent Temple to the goddess Artemis or Diana. It had taken 120 years to build it and it had already stood in the city 600 years when St. Paul preached there. The ancient writer Antipater of Sidon said that he had seen in person the wall of lofty Babylon on which was a road for chariots, and the statue of Zeus on Mt. Olympus, and the hanging gardens in Babylon, and the Colossus, and the high pyramids, and the vast tomb of Mausolus (at Halicarnassus) but when he saw this temple he said those other marvels lost their brilliancy. He said, "The sun never looked on anything so grand". But that gorgeous temple was still a house of idolatry and wickedness, offensive and unacceptable to the true God. And so were we even with all our gifts and abilities, talents and appearance as the crown of creation. Our bodies were houses of idolatry because of inherited sin and corruption and it was beyond our ability to be anything different.

BUT, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, **“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.”** He chose us, cleansed us and purified us, and graciously set us apart to be his dwelling place. No wonder Paul emphasized this truth and said, “You are NO LONGER foreigners, aliens, idolaters, enemies of God, alienated from God and his people. You are now part of his family and in fact set apart as temples of the Most High God.” That is a wonderful change indeed. A change in our status before God, our importance to God and our purposes under God resulted from God’s work through Jesus Christ. When Christ came into this world and became a human being like us, he took the responsibility for our idolatries, rebellions, and disobediences against the Lord God. He allowed himself to be punished fully on our behalf, letting himself be alienated and separated from God the Father in body and soul. The result is that we are now pardoned, freely forgiven, and declared suitable material for God’s temples on earth until we graduate to glory in heaven.

Another, rather obvious, feature of us as God’s temple is also emphasized repeatedly in the Bible. It is the foundation that we are built upon. Using the analogy between any ordinary building and its need for a suitable foundation, the Bible often identifies Jesus Christ and his Word, the Bible, as the foundation on which we are built. Sometimes Jesus alone is described the foundation. Sometimes the word of Jesus is described as the foundation. Here in Ephesians 2 both Jesus and his Word are mentioned. Here we are said to be **“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets [that is the Old and New Testament Scriptures], with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.** In reality, Jesus cannot be separated from his word that reveals him and his saving work to us. Here we have the firm and unshakable foundation on which we are built as God’s temple.

Maybe we’re all familiar enough with the importance of a good building foundation that little else needs to be said. But for illustration purposes I’ll mention something else that is already familiar to us -- the Leaning

Tower of Pisa in Italy. It was going to fall over, you know. Scientists traveled each year to measure the building's increasing tilt. They reported that the 179-foot tower moved about one-twentieth of an inch a year, and was once 17 feet out of plumb. They further estimated that the 833-year old tower would have leaned too far and collapsed onto the nearby restaurant unless drastic measures were undertaken. Several metric meters of soil from underneath the raised end were eventually removed and this action moved the tower one inch towards the center. While this does not seem like a major stride, the action makes the tower stable for at least another 300 years.

Many linguists say that the word "pisa" in our leaning Tower of Pisa actually means "marshy land," which gives some clue as to why the tower began to lean even before it was completed. Also, its foundation is only 10 feet deep. No wonder the building never stood entirely upright. The foundation was flawed from the beginning. As believers, built on and supported by Jesus and his Word, we don't have that problem. People in the world see many options for other foundations for their lives. People proclaim that their motto is sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll, or they place their belief in science or in man's ability to solve its own problems. Still others place their trust in the government, their own abilities, and some even boast that they have no foundation whatsoever for their lives. We cannot and will not say such things. Any foundation other than Jesus Christ is flawed and insufficient because all worldly values, systems, and ideologies are imperfect. Only God is perfect, eternal, and capable of satisfying the desires of our body, mind, and spirit. Other foundations will eventually crumble and perish. Jesus Christ will not.

I now ask a final question about ourselves as God's temple, built on Christ and his word as our foundation and inhabited by God himself. Why did God do this, for what purpose or function? To bless us with spiritual and eternal life? Yes, that is unquestionably true and we rejoice in that. But also to use us for his loving and saving purposes in our daily lives. We are walking, talking, living and breathing worship centers. Our bodies remain his temples as we go about our daily routines of work and play, eating and drinking. Our lifestyles and attitudes are to express devotion to our gracious God and dedication to his glory and his purposes for human life. In Romans chapter 12 Paul phrased it this way: **I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.** ² **Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.**

Let's not waste time or energy wondering or arguing **if** we are God's instruments in this world, to thank and praise, serve and obey him. Of course we are. And we are capable of doing this despite the opposition of unbelievers and of our own sinful nature as well. When confronted by sin and a personal sense of weakness, let us take comfort in the truth that we remain temples of the Most High God, declared suitable material by our gracious Lord, indwelt by this merciful and mighty God, and built on the solid foundation of Jesus Christ and his word. Our lives have extraordinary meaning and purpose since they reflect and express God's agenda for mankind. And, lest we forget, we are in this together. None of us stands alone or serves alone. The Apostle Paul put it this way: **In [Christ] the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.** I appeal to you as one part of the temple of God to another: Let us worship and serve him together, to his glory and the benefit of our neighbor.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, you have called us from sin to salvation, from unbelief to faith, from being your enemies to being your holy temples in body and spirit. Comfort and encourage us daily with this truth since we too often have a low opinion of our status in your eyes, forget our ability to serve you and our neighbor, and forget the importance of our high calling as your worship centers. Point us constantly to the foundation on which we stand, Christ and his truth, that we might more confidently express who we are by declaring your praises in our words and actions in this world, on our way to glory. Use us to share the good news of

your love and salvation with those we know and meet in life. Also hear us as we pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.