

May 19, 2019 – Revelation 21:1-7

The images were absolutely heartbreaking. Tragic in a way that is usually only possible when there's been a loss of life. But, no, nobody had died. It was just a building. Just a wonderful old church, burning before the entire world's eyes. Our Lady of Paris. Notre Dame cathedral.

There was, eventually, a sigh of relief when the smoke finally cleared. Yes, the damage was extensive, but not unreparable. Yes, many works of art were destroyed, but many were saved as well. The cathedral will be rebuilt, eventually. And the faithful Christians of Paris will have their church building returned to them one day.

The destruction of a church is always hard to hear, whether by fire or storm or man-made disaster or whatever the cause. We like to think that God's house should be impervious to such damage. That a legion of angels surrounds every place of worship. Turning back the wind and flames. But it doesn't work that way. It never has.

And the early Christians knew that better than anyone. Not only were their churches subject to the same natural disasters that we know so well, but they had another form of disaster to contend with. The Roman kind.

For almost 300 years, Christianity was illegal in the Roman Empire. For 300 years, sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ was punishable by death. For 300 years, there were no public places of Christian worship.

Not even the Temple in Jerusalem. We don't often think of that a Christian church, but it was very much so during the New Testament era. The book of Acts records that the Christians of Jerusalem continued to meet regularly in the Temple for many years. Just as Christ himself had often met with his disciples there.

It was during one of those times of worship, on Palm Sunday in fact, that Jesus prophetically declared that the day would come when of the Temple structure there would not be one stone left on top of another. It was the Romans who fulfilled that prophecy.

The Romans who, in 70 A.D., finally had enough of Jewish revolts and uprisings. And so they attacked Jerusalem, killed thousands, burned the city, and stripped it of everything Jewish. They rounded up the Jews in Jerusalem and sent them to the four corners of the Roman Empire. Taking quite a few Christians along the way as well. They couldn't really tell the difference between Jews and Christians at that point.

And of the temple, they did exactly what Jesus prophesied. They tore it down, brick by brick, stone by stone. Demolished it until there was nothing left.

And it was absolutely heartbreaking. Not just for the Jews, but for the Christians too. This was God's own house. This was the place where God's glory had once dwelt. Where His Ark of the Covenant had once sat. Where his sacrifices had been made. Where His Son had preached. And where so many of them had been raised as Jews, before they converted to Christianity. The destruction of the Temple was, for them, a tragedy even worse than seeing Notre Dame burning.

Yet, it was a tragedy that had to take place. It was destruction with a purpose and a plan. Not just the purpose of Roman persecution. But the purposes of God himself.

It's those purposes that John addresses in our reading from the Revelation today. As I've mentioned before, the Revelation was written around 90 A.D. 20 years after the Temple's destruction. I doubt John was there to see the city fall. But I have little doubt that he knew about. Everyone knew about it. There's an arch in Rome, the Arch of Titus, that was built to celebrate it. It's covered in images of the Temple being ripped apart by soldiers.

And so when we read John say that he “saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband,” this isn't him talking about God improving upon what's already there. He's not just saying, “The old Jerusalem is good, but God will give you something better.”

No, he's giving hope to those grieving the loss of their home and of their church. He's telling the church that what has been destroyed will be made new. That what has died will live again.

But it must be destroyed first. That's how God works. He's not a God who just gives your shoes a little spit polish and says, "Well, that's good enough." He's not interested in quick fixes or superficial beauty. To be his creation is to be made new.

Which means the old heaven and the old earth must pass away. Just as the old Adam inside each of us must pass away. Just as his own Son must pass away.

To be baptized into Jesus Christ is to be baptized into his death. To have that old man inside you killed on the cross and buried in the tomb. To be baptized is to be destroyed like the Temple. Torn brick from brick, stone from stone.

And then, finally, rise from the dead with Christ as a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come. By baptism, your spirit is no longer a part of this old heaven and old earth.

Your body is. And it too must pass away, like everything else. But your spirit, your eternal soul, it's already been made new. It is eternal. And it awaits the day when everything else will be made new as well. When your body will be made new and perfect and eternal, just as God always intended it.

I think it's telling that when John describes this new heaven and new earth and new Jerusalem, so much of what he says about it is saying what it's not. It is a place where death is no more. Where there is no crying. No mourning. No pain. It is a place where the former things have passed away.

It is place where everything bad about this world is taken away. It is a place where sin itself is taken away. Where evil has been destroyed. Where pain has perished. Where death has died.

Why? Because, "It is done." It is finished. Christ has taken all those evil things in this world, carried them to the cross, and killed them in his own flesh. When those nails were driven through his hands, they were driven through your sin. When those nails were driven through his feet, they were driven through your punishment.

It is done. Complete. Finished. The Alpha and the Omega, the beginning of all thing, the end of all things, has taken your end, your death, and made it a new beginning, a new creation.

And now that new creation has only one essential characteristic: *"The dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."*

Why was the Temple so important to the Israelites and Jews and Christians? Because God himself was there. The Ark of the Covenant was there. The Most Holy Place was there. You knew you could always find God in the Temple.

The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. But the new Temple of this new creation is eternal. Because that new Temple rose from the dead. The dwelling place of God is with man. His name is Jesus Christ. And he is with us always, to the very end of the age.

He is with us in His Word. He is with us in the water of baptism. And maybe most of all, he is with us in his own body and blood. Given to us for the forgiveness of our sins.

We are a new creation. And the dwelling place of God is with us. We, the Church, are the New Jerusalem, the bride of Christ, and God himself dwells in our midst. To the thirsty, he gives from the spring of the water of life without payment. For Christ has paid for it in his own blood.

So you may weep when cathedrals burn and churches fall. Just as the Christians of old wept when they heard that Jerusalem had been destroyed and the Temple had fallen. But know that the God of all comfort will wipe every tear from your eyes. Because our heritage is not in Temples or churches.

Our heritage is baptism into Christ. Our heritage is the bread from heaven. Our heritage is to be called God's sons and daughters, with him in our midst. And that is a heritage that can never be taken away. Amen.