

Revelation 21: 10, 20-22:5

“And in the spirit (one of the angels) carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light and its lamp is the Lamb. That is Revelation 21 verses 10, 22 and 23. Did you hear where John, the writer of Revelation said that in the holy city there is no temple? There is no need for a temple in the city of God.

Here we are on the other side of Christ's resurrection, living before his second coming. What possible meaning does this have for those of us living in this in between time? The answer has something to do with God becoming incarnate, being made human, in Jesus the Christ.

We believe that through the Holy Spirit Mary became the mother of Jesus, the Son of God. Because of this action by the Holy Spirit God lived among us, here on this earth. And because the Holy Spirit was sent after Jesus ascended into heaven God is still living on this earth. We believe in the presence of Jesus in the bread and wine we take at Holy Communion. We believe that God is present wherever two or three are gathered to worship together. We believe that God is present in this very building today as we gather to worship. A God who became human through Jesus is still present with us.

We believe God is present with us as we worship in our building because of the incarnation, but another reason we strongly believe that God is present with us in our church goes back to the belief found in 2 Chronicles 7:1 which tells us, “When Solomon had ended his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple,” and also from 1 Kings 9:3 after Solomon finished building the temple: “The Lord said to him, ‘I have heard your prayer and your plea that you made before me; I have consecrated this house that you have built and put my name there forever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time.’” In light of these verses, and our belief that God is present in our church, it is surprising to hear the verses from Revelation telling us that there will be no temple in the new Jerusalem when it comes down from the heavens.

John's point in this passage from Revelation seems to be that we are to worship God spiritually. In our gospel reading today we heard Jesus say that God will send the Holy Spirit. God is Spirit! God is not overly attached to anything earthly. That sounds like a contradiction. On one hand we are told that God became incarnate therefore linked to earthly things, and on the other hand God is free of all earthly things. As Christians we have to hold many things in balance. Beliefs such as the Trinity, the three in one, three persons of one God. Beliefs such as Jesus is fully God and fully human but is one man.

That's how it is with God's presence. We need that balance. We need to be able to affirm the spiritual nature of God, that is that God is not contained in anything physical, and also the incarnational God, that is, the God who became human through Jesus Christ.

We want to affirm God's presence in the church, God's presence in the Bible and in preaching. We also want to affirm with the vision John had in our reading from Revelation that God is more than the visible means used to connect us to God, and is a God who needs no sun or moon because God's very presence lights up the heavens and the earth. Before such a God all our words, good deeds, church programs, church

buildings, and ideas melt away into insignificance. But don't take this in the wrong way! There is nothing wrong with church worship, preaching, the sacraments, and good deeds done in the name of our Lord. They are vital to our faith, to responding to what God has done for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. However we can't forget that these are simply responses, they will not buy our way to God. Nothing we can do will buy our way to God. The God who lights up the heavens and the earth is with us because of the love shown to us through the acts of Jesus. God needs nothing but our belief that Jesus is God's Son who came to take away the sin of the world, who came to make things right between God and humanity.

It is good that God became human and continues to be revealed in ways that we can know God's presence. This is God's way of being a part of our lives, every part of our life is God's business. Even when we do not feel like God is there, God is present in our lives. This takes away for our excuse for not worshipping. An incarnate God is present in the ordinary things of our lives, including our singing and our liturgy. Neurobiological studies have shown that spiritual exercises such as singing and liturgy saturate the left prefrontal cortex of the brain with dopamine (Dean Hamer, *The God Gene*, pp. 72ff; Anthony Walsh, *The Science of Love*), and dopamine is related to enhanced energy (Daniel Amen, *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life*, p. 81).

We are the ones who have the inclination to go against the grain. We are the ones who, in the words of Martin Luther, make idols out of things that are not God. To have a god is to have something that we rely upon, the one in whom we find our refuge. So having a god means that we have something we trust and believe in with our whole heart. According to Luther it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol (*The Book of Concord* [Koth and Wengert, eds.], p.386). We take things like money, possessions, pleasure, power, jobs, even our families and church programs our gods. Luther writes "This is where God's game begins, not that we may be destroyed, but that He may examine us and lead us to a knowledge of our foulness, yet not in such a way that we despair, but rather that we cry to Him, invoke His mercy, and learn that He shows His mercy wondrously" (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 7, pp. 229-230). God gives us the hope that even though we are sinful creatures we find mercy in God.

The vision John received in today's reading from the book of Revelation serves to remind us that it is God alone whom we depend upon to deliver us from evil, and there is nothing that we might idolize that has the power of God. We find this through our faith which is made strong by faith, prayer, contemplation, and Bible study.

The next time we feel too busy or distracted to pray, to contemplate God's mysteries, too caught up in the accumulation of wealth, influence, power, even church programs, remember John's vision in our lesson. The incarnate God is present in the most ordinary earthly things you are now encountering. God does not need those things; God's glory and presence far outweigh the earthly activities in which we are engaged. Nothing that has been created can ultimately compete with the magnificent, loving God into whose presence we have come. Isn't it glorious to be in the presence of God? All glory be to God.

