

RECLAIMING THE TEMPLE FOR GOD
Lenten and Easter Series: The Holiness of God
Palm Sunday –March 29, 2015 –Hebrews 9: 19-28
The Church of the Covenant

Jesus, the only Son of the Holy, Holy, Holy God rides into the Holy City of Jerusalem and into the Holy Temple in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to reclaim the Temple, the city and the people for God. As we begin to conclude this series on the Holiness of God we see how the Highway of Holiness begun by the prophet Isaiah winds up as the Son of God makes His way toward the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem, the very place where it was believed the Living presence of the Holy God dwelt. But first some contrast...

In approximately 149 B.C. the Greek Hellenistic King Antiochus IV Epiphanes rode into Jerusalem and onto the Temple mount. He was the great persecutor of the Jews and thought he could force them to worship the Greek gods. Antiochus was the son of Antiochus the Great, of the Seleucid Empire, roughly the region where Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Palestine, Israel and Iran are today. After Alexander the Great had conquered the known world and then died prematurely his empire was broken up between his generals into several parts and one of them was the Seleucid Empire. Antiochus the IV named himself "Epiphanes" meaning "God manifest" or "Revelation of God". In an act of utter hubris he believed himself to be the living manifestation of God. Of course, the Jews would not bow down and worship him and so he sought to eradicate the Jewish religion, killing off all the priests, and indeed destroying the priestly lineage of Melchizedek, going back to the original Aaronic priests of the Old Testament. He rode into the Temple in Jerusalem, marched into the Temple, ripped open the veil of the Holy of Holies, believed to be the holiest of all where the Holy God literally dwelt, set up an idol to Zeus, and sacrificed a pig, according to the holiness code in the Old Testament, an unclean animal, on the Mercy Seat in the Holy of Holies. Unholiness and God's holiness cannot exist in the same space at the same time, so what would we suspect happens next? Within days a plague breaks out among his troops decimating and killing more than 10% of them; there are rumors of a palace coup back in Antioch, so Antiochus hurries back to save his empire, and within three years several things happen, the temple is cleansed and rededicated to the worship of the One True and Living God, Antiochus' armies never win another battle, and Antiochus, the self-named revelation of God, is dead, believing all his troubles stem from his desecration of the Temple. His successor, Antiochus V, sees the Seleucid Empire be destroyed and broken up among its enemies within 5 years after that. This utter hubris, believing himself to be a god, and entering into the Holy, Holy, Holy presence of the One True and Living God, is what the Old Testament prophet Daniel refers to as the "*abomination of desolation*". (*Daniel 11: 31*) The unholy thing standing in the presence of a Holy God. Antiochus Epiphanes is an archetype of persecutors of the Jews past and present. It is a cautionary tale –for it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the Living God. You can read more about it by reading "Jewish Antiquities" the fourth book, by Josephus, the historian.

By contrast is Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The Son of God, in stark contrast to Antiochus, rides into Jerusalem, to reclaim His Father's city and Temple, not with moral hubris, but humbly, astride a donkey. He marches into the outer courts of the Temple but not yet into the Holy of Holies. Like the High Priest of Old, it is later this Holy Week where Jesus Christ will enter into the Holy of Holies, with the one, perfect acceptable sacrifice, His own shed blood, for the atonement of the sins of His people. But not yet and not on Palm Sunday. For in a great and prophetic act Jesus enters into those outer courts and "*drove out all those who sold and bought in the temple*" and "*he overturned the tables of the money-changers*" and he declared for all to hear –*It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers."* (*Matthew 21: 12-13*) The Temple had become corrupt. The priests were no longer in the lineage of Melchizedek, for Antiochus had killed them all. And what was masquerading as worship was just high theater. It was to be a spiritual place, a "house of prayer". But the priests had robbed the Temple of its Spirit, had lost the Living presence of the Living God. And so the Messiah had come to reclaim the Temple, to enter into it

and to make it HOLY, and to retake it for the Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God Almighty. He was to re-win the Temple mount by a mount called Mt. Calvary. Reza Aslan's book "Zealot" on the ministry of Jesus basically argues that He is a radical on the issue of the holiness of God's Temple and the entire focus of His ministry is to reclaim the Temple and make it holy once again. Jesus seals His fate, and His death upon a cross, the very moment He challenges the Jewish High Priests and powers that be, when he undermines the financial backing of the false façade of Temple worship, by entering on Palm Sunday and turning the tables over on the moral chaos, the self-worship and hubris of those who claim to be His priests. Unlike Antiochus, Jesus came to make HIS Temple HOLY, and HIS City HOLY and HIS People HOLY. Jesus walked the Highway of Holiness to Jerusalem and the Temple in order to reclaim it and make it HOLY, HOLY, HOLY once again.

But today, of course, there is not a literal Temple built with stones in Jerusalem any more. No, today there is, as the Bible says, a "temple not built with hands". Where does the literal presence of the Holy God dwell today? Not in a literal temple built with stone in a literal place in Jerusalem. The presence of a HOLY, HOLY, HOLY God dwells in us, in our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. As the Bible asks: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3: 16) So now let's regroup for a minute. As the Old Testament says, we are to be HOLY "for I the Lord am HOLY" (Leviticus 20: 26) So how are we HOLY? How are we HOLY as God is Holy? And Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, "You must be perfect –complete-whole, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5: 48) So how can we be perfect, complete and whole? Do we try a little harder to be a little better? No. Do we strive to make it to holiness? No. Do we try on our own power to be perfect? No. Do we try to work ourselves up to God on our own strength? No. All of that is hubris and thinking we can do something that we can never do. All of that is Antiochus Epiphanes entering into the Temple. All of that is the very corruption that Jesus sought to root out. Our selves seeking to be a substitute for God; our own wills seeking to do what only the Holy God can do. We are saved by GRACE and OH how much more, we are sanctified, we are made holy by GRACE, by God doing for us what we could never hope to do for ourselves. What makes the Temple HOLY? What makes the HOLY City HOLY? What makes HOLY Week HOLY? The HOLY presence of a HOLY God dwelling within. We are to be HOLY as God is Holy and so when the HOLY God takes up residency within our heart and life, by the Holy Spirit, by receiving and welcoming Jesus into our heart, we are made HOLY by the HOLY presence of a HOLY God. We are to be PERFECT as our heavenly Father is perfect, and we are made complete when our flesh is merged with the Spirit of the Living God, we are "new creations" we are now Temples filled with the Living Presence of a HOLY GOD. Be ye Holy. Be Ye Perfect. We cannot do this on our own. Oh, but a HOLY GOD taking up residency within our heart through Jesus, that can do what we could never hope to do –allow us to enter into the presence of a HOLY, HOLY, HOLY God, only because of a new and living way, created by the Lord Jesus Christ. What we cannot do, the Holy God can do.

So Jesus Christ has arrived today on this Palm Sunday to reclaim the Temple for His Father in heaven. The Lord seeks permission to enter in and to cleanse that Temple not made with hands. He has gathered His disciples and rides astride a humble donkey. You can hear the chants arising in the distance from the Mt. of Olives where He begins to the outer courts of the Temple where He ends. So, will you fling wide the portals of your heart and let HIM in? Will you ask the HOLY, HOLY, HOLY Lord God Almighty to come and take up residency within your heart and life? Be Ye Holy as I am HOLY, says the Holy God. And Today He affords us the possibility to do so...to stand in the presence of a Holy, Holy, Holy God. "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors! That the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? Who is this King of glory?" (Psalm 24: 7-8) If you don't know by now, you'll need to come back on Maundy Thursday and find out. And Amen.

By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
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