Sermons at Christ Church

Be God's Light that Shines in the Darkness.

Lent III
The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

Today is a special day for many of us. We welcome God's living temples back into God's holy space. We welcome you into God's sanctuary-the place where God's glory dwells because it is filled with God's living temples who can offer themselves as sanctuaries.

The gospel story couldn't be more appropriate where Jesus is incensed by the commercial activities at the temple that he made a whip of cords with which he drove out those selling cattle, sheep, goats and doves and overturned the tables of money changers. His simple message was, stop making my father's house a market place. I was reading Leviticus the other day and came by Wave offering. I didn't even remember that there was such an offering. That and many other offerings and sacrifices that ancient Jews had to offer to God at the temple created an unhealthy situation where the sellers of livestock and money changers took advantage and stole from helpless and faithful Jew whose only desire was to be in a right relationship with God. And in pursuit of that goal, they had to buy animals for sacrifices at the temple. Believe me, the temple is supposed to be the one place where your holiness and mine, your loyalty to God and mine made a difference. But that temple had been turned into a den of thieves because of a decaying sense of loyalty.

Solomon built the first temple which was destroyed by the Babylonians. The second temple was built after the return from exile. It was beautiful, holy and revered sanctuary. It was a source of pride for the Jew who believed that there was no other God beside Yahweh. For the Jew, the temple represented God's holy and magnificent presence among God's people. It was where they could honor their covenantal relationship with God, it was the center of Jewish life. For the Jew, God was not only present in the temple but to find and worship God, one had to go to the temple.

It used to be that the spire on top of churches were so tall that it was the first thing that any person would see when approaching a city or town. Over the years, however, high rise buildings have taken over the skyline, dominating the church spire. The dominance of the skyline by high rise

buildings tells of the extent to which commerce now dominates every single aspect of our lives. Loyalty, honor, decency, honesty, mutual respect, things that used to matter most have all but lost their relevance. We are more concerned about how we can maintain or improve our power, personal wealth and worldly comforts, often times without paying attention to the how, because we have lost our sense of loyalty to one another.

A few weeks into my tenure here at Christ Church, I had my first test of faith. Someone who was a parishioner wrote a horrifying letter about me. I couldn't even believe that I was capable of doing the sort of the things I read about me. I asked myself, how did this person know that I could even do that? It was a moment of personal attack and destruction for me, and it made me question why I left Philadelphia. I remember saying to myself, if even a word of what this person wrote about me was true, there was no way I could under any circumstances survive in Philadelphia for six plus years. During that difficult period, Mary became my rock. I called Mary almost every day and she called almost every day. Mary came by the office almost every day. Mary likes to send long emails and after our daily meetings, Mary will send a long email when she gets home. She was more like the pastor who constantly reminded me that everything will be alright.

At its core, that sense of loyalty that I got from Mary is what the Ten Commandments is about-loyalty to God, loyalty to neighbor. That sense of loyalty is what the temple stands for-loyalty to God, loyalty to neighbor. I hate to think about Mary leaving Columbia because I know I have lost a loyal and faithful parishioner and friend.

Mary carries with her a unique quality as a living temple. We first hear of the body being referenced as a temple in the gospel story-he was talking about his body. John says. But Jesus' detractors didn't understand what he meant by what he said, and it seemed pretty outlandish to them that the same man who was causing raucous in the temple could make such a claim that he can destroy the temple and build it in three days. How possible?

Paul helps us to understand that to those who are perishing the message of the gospel is foolishness. They too cannot understand that God has not allowed us to experience the complete absence of his spirit, that like the people of Israel who journeyed from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, we can also make a journey from sin and evil toward God.

Those people cannot understand that by virtue of Jesus' death and resurrection, there's been a dynamic shift in the way a Christian perceives what a temple is. Paul poses this question "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" My beloved, you are God's temple. God's spirit dwells in you. Like the temple, you were made for holiness. You were made for righteousness. You were made for God's glory. You are God's living temple.

That is why there is always a deep seated desire within us to be right with God, to stay in right relationship with God. And for that that reason we can no longer rely on a temple situated elsewhere, as beautiful as it may be, as the only place where we can worship God or express our sense of loyalty to God.

Our task therefore is to reject any attempt to turn God's temple-your body and mine into a market place-a place of commerce where the overarching goal is to lose our sense of loyalty to God and neighbor, to take as much as we want from as many as we want without any duty of care.

Remember, the temple is holy, and by itself cannot be corrupt. Rather, it is the people who worship within the temple, the people who offer sacrifices within the temple, they are the ones who can turn a holy space into a market place, they are the ones who can violate every covenant with God. To therefore accept the new dynamic-the shift that refers to you and me as the living temples of God, and that God's spirit dwells within us, we should dare to express the same anger as Jesus' at the temple over our own sins and the sins of those who desecrate the Father's house with their disloyalty.

Lent offers you and I the opportunity to reflect on the gift we have as God's living temples. Lent helps us to remember that we can meet God in our own living temples and that of others. Lent helps us to reconnect ourselves with what the living temple stands for. Three things that the living temple stands for: first, your motive in all you do should be for God's glory. Second, to obey the Word of God and to do the will of the Father whose house you can turn into a market place if you lose that sense of loyalty. Third, you should always work in the power of the Holy Spirit.

I will always remember Mary as a living temple-a faithful woman who sought not her glory but that of her Father. Whose Father's house-her body, was not a citadel for commerce but a sanctuary for many, many people including me. The good news in all this is that you can also be that living temple that believes in loyalty to God and neighbor, and above all, desires to offer your body to be a sanctuary.

Amen.