

A Den of Robbers?
Jeremiah 7:1-15

If there's anything we Mississippians were good at, at least until the COVID crisis hit, it was going to church. There are over 60 congregations just in Claiborne County, and year in and year out, our state continues to lead the rest of the United States in church attendance. More of us believe in God and more of us pray every day than the citizens of any other state, at least according to a recent Pew research poll. Yes, we may be economically poor when compared to the rest of the United States, but we are rich in many of the things that matter most: warm relationships, genuine friendliness, and a common understanding of right and wrong, the social and cultural capital that can only be accrued by a civilization that orders its common life according to God's Holy Word.

For we Mississippians have a long and rich spiritual heritage, don't we? After all, Christians have been worshipping in this part of Mississippi for well over two hundred years: Salem Baptist Church was organized on Cole's Creek in 1791, and the Methodists established a congregation in 1799 that still meets in Washington – that's the one in Adams County. Presbyterian missionaries were hard on their heels, organizing our first congregation down in Jefferson County in 1803. Our own congregation has been worshipping together since 1807, on this site since 1828 and in this building since 1860. And our house of worship is known by everyone: the church with the golden hand atop the steeple simply needs no introduction. And I never have to give directions, for this is one of the few buildings of which you can honestly say, "It's right on Highway 61, and you can't miss it."

You know, the Palm Sunday crowd could say many of the same things. For at that time, they could boast of a religious heritage that reached back some 1400 years to the days of Abraham. Yes, centuries earlier, the Temple of Solomon had been destroyed, and their ancestors had been carried into exile in Babylon, just as Jeremiah had predicted. But God had brought them back to the land He had promised to their ancestors. And they had a magnificent, beautiful place to worship, the Second Temple which was completed around 515 BC. And around 20 BC, Herod the Great began an expensive program to expand the area around the Temple, doubling the size of the mountaintop on which it sat, and thus making it even more grand than Solomon's Temple had been in the days of Jeremiah.

And just like us modern Mississippians, the Palm Sunday crowd had good reason to consider themselves socially and culturally superior in so many ways when compared to the unbelievers around them. Yes, the Romans may have been much more wealthy and powerful by worldly standards, but none of those Roman gods, like Jupiter, Venus or Mars, had any real power to help them. And their selfish, hedonistic practices would cause any proper Jew to blush: the worshippers of Bacchus engaged in drunken orgies, and Romans didn't give a second thought to throwing their unwanted babies out on the trash heap to die.

In the same way, it was easy for the people of Jerusalem who lived back in Jeremiah's day to be more than a bit smug about their religious heritage. After all, unlike all the nations around them, they worshipped the One True God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth. And this God had brought their ancestors out of slavery by overpowering the Pharaoh of Egypt, who ruled the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth at the time. And the One True God had given them a place to live in what we now call the Middle East, the place He had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And in spite of all the political problems they had experienced since the Exodus, from the separation of their nation into

the kingdoms of Israel and Judah to the expansion of unbelieving empires all around them, a descendant of David had sat on his throne in Jerusalem for well over 300 years at the time of Jeremiah's ministry.

Moreover, the One True God had made it clear that Jerusalem was the only place He wanted to be worshipped. And after King Solomon had built a massive Temple according to the Lord's express instructions, God Himself had demonstrated His approval by filling it with His glory cloud on the day it was dedicated. In fact, God's presence was so overpowering that not even the priests could bear to remain within the Temple (I Kings 8:10-11).

And after the Temple had been dedicated in such an impressive way, God had made a promise to King Solomon: "I have consecrated this house which you have built by putting My name there forever, and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually" (I Kings 9:3). Oh, yes: the people of Jeremiah's day had good reason, as verse four of our passage says, to be confident that the Temple of the Lord would continue to be a source of blessing for them for years to come.

But that's why Jeremiah's words in chapter 7 must have come as such a shock to them. For what did he say about these upstanding, respectable, church-going types? He accused them of divided loyalties, of worshipping the One True God while at the same time making offerings to other gods. He accused them of worshipping the One True God while at the same time breaking God's Law of love for one another by stealing, killing, and committing adultery (Jeremiah 7:9). Worst of all, he accused them of putting their faith in the fact that the Temple was in their midst, taking advantage of God's promise to dwell with them just so that they could go on defying Him, living in all sorts of sinful ways (Jeremiah 7:10).

Yes, that's why Jeremiah said the people of his time had made God's Temple into a den of robbers: they were trying to steal the blessings that they wanted from God, the prosperity and safety and security that they craved, while withholding from Him the wholehearted love and obedience that He deserved in return. Jeremiah thus said that God's people were, in a very real sense, putting their faith in the Temple instead of in the Lord.

And Jesus said the same sorts of things about the people who worshipped in Second Temple, didn't He? After all, even though their children were right to acclaim Him as the Son of David, the Palm Sunday crowd was no more loyal to Him than Jeremiah's people had been to the Lord. Instead, the chief priests and the scribes looked at the Temple as nothing more than a place to wring more gifts and offerings from those who came to worship there. They even let those who sold animal sacrifices set up their shops in the Court of the Gentiles, the only place where people who weren't Jews could go to pray. Yes, because of their callous lack of concern, the Gentiles who were seeking to draw close to God were forced to worship in an atmosphere similar to a busy mall during Christmas season.

Yes, it turns out that the people who worshipped in the Second Temple had fallen into the same sorts of bad habits as those who worshipped in the First: they were merely repeating rituals rather than pursuing a genuine relationship with God, they relied on their heritage instead of pursuing greater holiness, and they didn't mind taking advantage of the poor and those on the margins of their society. It's no wonder Jesus joined Jeremiah in calling their place of worship a den of robbers.

Okay, so what can we modern Christians possibly learn from these two passages? Yes, we enjoy our beautiful, prominent place of worship, but I doubt any of us are placing our faith in our building. After all, we Christians know that we can draw near to God anywhere we may be. After all, in the spring we worship at the Shack across the road from the Yokena Church, and in the fall we celebrate the Lord's

Supper under the pavilion at Grand Gulf Military Park. We know public worship can take place wherever God's people come together to pray, to hear His Word and sing His praise.

And we know that we as individuals can enter the Lord's presence wherever we are, whenever we want to. We can pray in a deer stand or standing at a kitchen sink, or even when we're behind the wheel of a tractor or a truck, as long as we keep our eyes open.

But are we modern Christians any less tempted to take pride in our spiritual practices, the fact that we pray or read God's Word or attend divine worship? Do we ever catch ourselves looking down on those who don't do these things, and as a result who live in morally questionable ways?

More seriously, are we any more exclusively devoted to God than were the people who worshipped in either the First or Second Temple? For even if we scrupulously keep our daily prayer time, how often do we think about God during the rest of the day? Even if we are reading God's Word every day, do we really rely on that Word to guide us, or do we catch ourselves falling back on our own logic or feelings, our own experience or traditions when we have decisions to make? And are we living in the joyful confidence of the redeemed children of God? Or do our anxieties reveal that we are actually depending on false gods that continually let us down? In short, are we any less guilty of two-timing God than His ancient people were?

And sure, we may come to worship on Sunday mornings and Bible Study on Tuesdays. We may say all the right things, affirming the Reformed theology enshrined in our Confession of Faith and Catechisms. We may give generously to our congregation, and also support the various charitable organizations that are doing the work of the Lord in our community. But are we consistently godly in the way we treat one another? If we aren't guilty of the thefts and murders and adulteries of which Jeremiah accused his listeners, are we any more free from the covetousness, the anger, and the lust which Jesus told us is just as bad?

And no, we may not be actively oppressing the immigrants, the fatherless, and those who have no means of support in our community, but are we actively trying to help them? No, we may not have allowed businessmen to hawk their wares in our house of worship, but is our self-centered behavior off-putting to those who haven't yet placed their faith in Christ? In sum, have we come here today with divided hearts and distracted minds, opening up our Bibles and hitting our knees just so we can get what we want out of God so we can keep on living for ourselves? Have we turned the House of God into a den of robbers?

Well, Jeremiah reminded his listeners in verse 14 that, at one time, the Tabernacle of God had been at a place called Shiloh. But why had the Lord moved His place of worship from there to the First Temple in Jerusalem? For the same reason that Jeremiah said the First Temple would be torn down and the same reason Jesus said the Second Temple would be destroyed: because God's people weren't listening to Him. Because God's people weren't obeying Him. Because God's people were not loving Him or loving other people the way they were supposed to.

And so, because the First Temple had become a den of robbers, God did what Jeremiah predicted: He allowed the Babylonians to destroy it and to carry God's people off into exile. In the same way, because the Second Temple was bearing no more fruit than a barren fig tree, Jesus cursed it, saying that not one of its stones would be left standing on another. And sure enough, forty years after they crucified Jesus, the Romans tore down all those beautiful buildings and courtyards that Herod the Great had so carefully planned and constructed. In fact, the Roman army did such a thorough job of

destroying the Temple that modern scholars still can't figure out exactly where it was. For the Wailing Wall where modern Jews go to pray is nothing more than a retaining wall holding up the side of the hill on which their First Temple and their Second Temple had stood – somewhere.

And none of the things in which we are tempted to place our trust, none of our buildings or our bank accounts, none of our institutions or our traditions, none of our rituals or our religiosity, none of our moral or ethical actions have any more saving power than the First or Second Temple, those buildings which have long since disappeared.

So, let's heed the call of Jeremiah, the call of Jesus. Let us amend our ways and our deeds. Let us turn away from sin and self and trust in Christ alone as our Savior and bow the knee to the Son of David as our Lord. For He alone is the Solid Rock on which we can build our lives: all other ground is sinking sand.