

Cleaning House Ezekiel 43:1-12

On August 30, Hurricane Idalia blew through Valdosta, Georgia, the town where I grew up, and where Jim, my 90-year-old stepdad, lives. He was in the hospital there, and I happened to be in town visiting when the storm hit. No, it was not nearly as bad as Katrina, but it toppled trees all over town, and of course, they took down lots of powerlines with them. It was bad enough that when I tried to get to the hospital the day after the storm, I had to turn back: every possible path was blocked by emergency crews trying to clear the roads.

Now, we were so blessed – there was no damage to the house or even the backyard fence. But after any such storm, there's lots of cleaning up to do. Even though there were no trees down in my yard, there were lots of limbs to pick up, and who knows how long it will take the city crews to collect all the yard waste piled up alongside so many roads? And with the power out for a week, I had a lot of inside cleaning to do as well. In fact, I had to get rid of some stuff I should have thrown out a long time ago.

You see, mama died back in 2015. And she had suffered from Alzheimer's disease for about 10 years before that. When she had been healthy, she loved to bake, and the blueberry bushes and pecan trees in our yard provided some of the ingredients for many pies, muffins, and cookies throughout the years. But she got to the point where she couldn't follow a recipe: at first, she couldn't remember what she had already put in, and then she forgot how to read altogether. As a result, the blueberries and pecans that she had carefully put up in her freezer went unused – and by this time, some of them were almost 20 years old.

You know, I've been needing to throw that stuff out for years. But the thought of washing all those containers was daunting, and it was a lot easier just to leave it in the freezer: out of sight, out of mind. Well, last week, when the power was off for a week, there was no more putting it off. And frankly, while waiting for the electricians and the power company to show up, there wasn't a lot else to do. So, both the refrigerator and the freezer finally got a thorough cleaning. And that means that, now that the power is back on, everything is ready for Jim to move back in.

And that's the same sort of thing Ezekiel is talking about in today's passage: getting God's house ready for Him to move back in. You see, in chapters 10 and 11, Ezekiel had a vision of God's glory abandoning the Temple that Solomon had built for Him some 500 years previously. And why did God say He was moving out? Because of His people's unfaithfulness to Him: because they gave their love and devotion to all kinds of false gods, and because they refused to follow the Lord's perfect Law of love, caring for one another in the way that He had told them to. You might say that the first 39 chapters of the book of Ezekiel were describing the wreck that the storm of sin had made, not only of God's House, but of the whole world.

But starting in chapter 40, Ezekiel begins to describe what God's House should look like, if it is fit for God to live in. It should have guardhouses in all of its walls, to make sure that no one and nothing impure or sinful can come into it. It should have plenty of storehouses for all the offerings that the people will bring into the Temple. And best of all, chapter 47 describes how the water used to purify the priests and the offerings should no longer be drawn from a large basin: instead, a river should flow out

of the Temple, bringing healing not only to God's House, but to all of His people. In fact, that living water would enable even the salty waters of the Dead Sea to support marine life.

Now, it's obvious from that last detail that Ezekiel wasn't describing the physical replacement for Solomon's Temple that the Babylonians had destroyed: after all, if you diverted all the sources of fresh water in the entire region into the Dead Sea, I doubt you could reduce its salinity to the point where fish could live in it. And even when Herod the Great carried out his massive effort to beautify and enlarge the Second Temple some 500 years after Ezekiel's vision, he didn't use Ezekiel's plan as a guide. No, the Temple that Ezekiel describes was never built and never could be built, at least not by human hands, not out of wood and stone.

But it was, in fact, during the days of Herod the Great that God began the process of building the very same Temple that Ezekiel describes. For what did Peter tell us in our Responsive Reading? It was in the birth of Jesus Christ that the Lord laid in Zion the cornerstone of the true Temple of the Lord. And this Temple is a spiritual house built of living stones, constructed of all those who trust in Christ as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord. For that's the good news: all of God's people put together are the fulfillment of Ezekiel's elaborate prophecy. We are Temple. Moreover, we are the holy priesthood, and our purpose is to offer up the spiritual sacrifices of prayer and praise and service that are acceptable to God.

But we are also called to be the river flowing out of the Temple whose waters heal the nations. For what did Jesus say, as he gazed upon the Second Temple that Herod had built, the massive building of stone and wood that would be destroyed some 40 years later by the Romans? "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:38). Yes, those of us who have come to Christ by faith, those of us who have received His mercies, those of us whom He has called out of darkness into His marvelous light, those who have drunk of the living water of His Holy Spirit are called, as Peter says, to show forth His praises, to proclaim His excellencies so that the whole world may come to Him and be healed.

Oh yes, there's no getting around it: the Church of Jesus Christ is the Temple that Ezekiel describes. As the Lord says in verse 7 of today's passage, we are the place of the Lord's throne and the place of the soles of His feet. Because we are filled with His Holy Spirit, we are the place where the Lord dwells among us forever.

But why did Ezekiel take so much care to describe such a perfect, holy, life-giving Temple? Look at verse 10: so that we might be ashamed of our iniquities, of all the ways in which our sin has made God's House unfit for Him to live in. So that we might measure our individual lives, our congregations, and our presbyteries according to the unwavering standard of God's perfect plan, just as Ezekiel's guide carefully measured and described every dimension of the temple in his vision.

So, in what sort of shape is God's House after the storm of all our sin has blown through? How are we doing as a congregation where it comes to building up and caring for the Body of Christ?

Sure, we're Evangelical Presbyterians, so we say we believe all the right things about God and His Word. After all, our Book of Government clearly says that "it is the privilege and primary responsibility of the local church to worship God regularly."

But is our practice as good as our profession? Are we really gathering for worship as often as we can, renewing our faith and clarifying our understanding of obedient service to God? Or do we allow

any excuse to prevent us from attending public worship? Do we prefer to do all other kinds of weekend activities rather than to gather with God's people for prayer and praise?

And we are the Evangelical Presbyterian Church after all. Again, our Book of Government makes clear that "it is the primary mission of the local church to evangelize, making disciples by extending the gospel both at home and abroad, leading others to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, providing for the nurture of that faith that all might worship the true God and grow in grace and in sanctification." So, how are we doing on that score? Are we telling others what we know about Jesus and encouraging them to trust in Him? Are we even taking the trouble to invite people to come and worship with us?

I've heard that 86% of those who start attending church do so because a friend invited them – in contrast, only 6% come because the pastor invited them. Why the big difference? Because every one of you can say something that I can't say: "Come to worship and sit with me." So, are we issuing those kinds of invitations? Are we encouraging those who need to know Christ or to know Him better to join us in the journey of discipleship?

And if not, then why not? Could it be that our own manner of life is putting people off? Could it be that the sticks and limbs and fallen trees of our obvious sin and selfishness are causing others to stumble over us? Could it be that the malice and hatred and slander we display toward one another by our harsh words and deeds are preventing unbelievers from seeing Jesus in us because all they can see is our hypocrisy? Come to think of it, is our lack of love for one another preventing our fellow believers from joining us in worship and service? Or have we allowed our resentments and grudges and misunderstandings to drive us away from the fellowship of the saints? In short, are we as individuals an open door into the Temple of God, or are we a barrier to those who might otherwise want to come in?

And what about those hidden sins in our lives, those spoiled or rotten things in the corners of our hearts that we should have thrown out years ago? What about the things that Peter calls "fleshly lusts:" the sexual temptations, the use of pornography, the abuse of alcohol or drugs that are all too common? And what about the lies we tell our families to cover them up? What about the covetousness, the greed, the envy and the fear we harbor in our hearts because we are not satisfied with the Lord Himself and what He has so graciously given us? Peter says these kinds of secret sins wage war against our souls, destroying God's Temple from within. So are we busily tearing down the House of God that we say we want to build up?

Worse yet, could it be that some of us church members haven't ever really trusted in Christ as Savior and bowed the knee to Him as Lord? Could it be that some of us are still looking to ourselves or our idols, to the creation rather than the Creator to protect us and pardon us and provide for us? Could our real problem be that we aren't really hooked up to the only source of Spiritual power at all?

Look, we all know that no one would want to move back into a house with dead trees all over the yard, with moldy food in the fridge and freezer, and with no source of electricity. We know that after a physical storm, there's lot's of cleaning up to do to make any house fit to live in.

So, if we take an honest look at ourselves and our congregation in comparison to the perfect Temple that Ezekiel describes, is our house ready for God? Given our public and private sins, given the things we've done and the things we've left undone, would God want to live in us?

And if not, do we need to repent? Do we need to put away what Ezekiel calls our whoredom, our infidelity against God? Do we need to put away our abominations, all those things that drive a

wedge between us and God, and between us and others? Do we need to get off the throne of our lives so that God might have His rightful place?

Yes, the good news is that, through the cross, the tomb, the resurrection, and the ascension of Christ, the Lord has kept His promise to dwell among His people forever. But if we would be among those people, if we would be a Temple worthy for God to live in, do we need to surrender ourselves more completely to the One Who gave up everything for us? Do we need to clean house?