

First Sunday after Christmas; December 31, 2023

Colossians 3:12-17

“The Lord Fills His Temples”

Therefore, as God’s elect, holy and loved, clothe yourselves with heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with one another and forgive each other if anyone has a complaint against anyone else. Forgive, just as Christ forgave you. And, in addition to all these things, put on love, which ties things together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ control your hearts, to which you were also called, in one body. And be thankful.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God. And everything you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

King David wanted to build it. And the Lord told him, “No. Not you, but your son Solomon.” David did not whine about the Lord’s will, but spent his life preparing as much as he could for his son to get to work one day. When Solomon came to power, he finally started building the Lord’s temple. It took him seven years to finish what was the most beautiful, expensive, and elaborate structure in Israel’s history.

But the temple was not complete until the day the priests carried the Ark of the Covenant up from the city of David and set it in the temple’s Most Holy Place. And when the Ark came into the temple, the Glory of the Lord came with it. The Lord made his presence visible in a cloud so thick that, in a scene that must have been both frightening and comical, the priests could not find their designated spots to begin serving in that temple.

Sadly, that glorious temple, planned by David, built by Solomon, filled by the Lord, was destroyed a few centuries later. The Babylonians leveled and plundered it. And for nearly a century, there was no temple at all in Jerusalem.

Eventually, though, that changed. After the Persians sent the people of Judah back home, they rebuilt the temple. They dithered for a while, and the new temple was no where near as impressive as Solomon’s. But they did get it done.

And a few centuries later, the Lord entered that temple, too. This time he did not enter with an Ark carried by priests; that was long since lost. And he did not enter as a blinding fog. This time, the Lord entered the temple as an eight-day-old boy carried by his carpenter stepfather Joseph and Jesus’ mother Mary. This time the glory of the Lord in the temple was not scary and blinding to the eyes, but soft and cuddly. And the glory of the Lord in this baby boy was delightful to a man named Simeon and a very old prophetess named Anna.

When those two believers looked at the baby Jesus, they saw the Son of God and their Savior. They saw the glory of God’s salvation in that baby boy. And the glory of Jesus, God’s Son and their Savior, filled their souls. Simeon sang a beautiful song to announce that he was ready to leave this world any time because in the baby Jesus he saw the glory of salvation for him and all people. And as for Anna, she could not stop speaking about the glory of God, who was carried into the temple that day by his mother Mary.

This is not a temple, properly speaking. But the glory of the Lord fills this place too. Jesus enters our church every time we gather here. And we see his glory here. It does not come as a blinding fog, or as a cooing baby, but Jesus does come to us in glory here, too.

We see the glory of Jesus' salvation in the Word preached; we find the glory of Jesus' love under bread and wine and in the touch of water. Jesus' glory does not blind us as it did in Solomon's temple, and we do not hold it in our arms like Simeon and Anna, but his glory fills this place.

Because here we hear the rest of Jesus' story: Joseph and Mary took him home from the temple, and he was filled with wisdom and God's favor rested on him. He lived as a perfect son to them, to keep the Fourth Commandment for us. He returned to the temple when he was twelve with perfect worship and perfect knowledge of God's Word, to keep the Third Commandment perfectly for us. He was the perfect neighbor to everyone, to keep the Fifth Commandment perfectly for us. Every one of God's commandments, which we violate thoroughly, he kept completely.

Even as he shed his blood of on the cross, Jesus provided for his friend John and his mother Mary, cried out for the Father to forgive his executioners, and trusted his Father fully to the end. This holy life of Jesus is our glorious salvation, because it atones for all our failures.

His death on the cross is our salvation too, because it satisfies God's wrath against our sins. Jesus suffered through literal hell for us on the cross, in our place, so we never have to go there. And he rose on Easter so that we will follow him out of the grave, bodies glorified like his own.

That is the eternal gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of all he did to save us from our sins and give us life forever in heaven. That gospel is the glory of God, because it is the story of his eternal and saving love for us. It just filled this place as I spoke it, and the gospel fills this place with glory every time a sinner is baptized, every time we receive Jesus' body and blood at the altar.

So far you have heard a sermon on the First Lesson and the Gospel, but not on the Second Lesson from Colossians, which was, allegedly, to be the basis for this message. But really this has all been leading up to what the Holy Spirit taught those Christians and all Christians through the pen of St. Paul. It's this: you are a temple, too. You are God's temple, as he says in his Word. You are his temple because he built you in your mother's womb and has preserved your life to this day.

But you are not just his temple because he made you. If that were true, even unbelievers would be God's temple, and he never speaks of them any such way in Scripture; he only speaks of believers that way. And here's why: By the Spirit's power, the glory of the gospel has filled your heart. He has worked through water, word, bread and wine, to fill your heart with Jesus' salvation, the glory of his gospel.

When sinners are filled with the glory of Jesus' gospel, they are created again. God reconstructs them as his own temples, filled with his glory. Listen to how Paul speaks to these Christians: **God's elect [chosen], holy [which is what we are through faith in Christ] and loved...Christ forgave you...the peace of Christ, to which you were called...do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.** These are the people God has made his own, new creation. They are his temples.

So are you. God has chosen you to be filled with the glory of Jesus' salvation. He has made you his own holy one, forgiven, who knows what the name Jesus means: salvation. God fills you with gospel of his Son; you are his temple.

When God fills a temple, it changes. Solmon's temple changed when the Lord entered with glory. Life changed for Simeon and Anna when they saw Jesus' glory. Our lives change, too.

We now live our lives in the glory of Jesus' salvation. We believe he lived a holy life to save us, and that is now the life we strive to live, too. Paul calls us "holy," and that's no exaggeration. You are holy in God's eyes. Live as that holy person.

There is so much here to guide us in these new lives, lived as God's temples filled with his glory. First there is **heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience**. The common thread to all five of these qualities is that are completely Christ-like. Jesus saw people hurting and did more than say, "What a shame." He stopped and healed and drove out demons. He multiplied loaves and fish so people would make it home. He saw sheep without a shepherd and taught them until he was exhausted. He saw sinners and came to live and die and rise for them. We cannot do all Jesus did, because none of us is divine. But we have what God has given us, and the glory of salvation that fills us moves to be like our Savior.

Patience is one of the Savior's qualities; bearing with others is a bit different. People may be slow, or need many rounds of forgiveness; that requires patience. But bearing with someone has less to do with slowness or sinning against you. It means that not everyone is like you, or goes about things the same way. It's not a question of right or wrong, but of wisdom or preference, and you may simply not agree with how they think or how they choose to work things out. Even so, you will hang in there with them and not judge them in areas where God has not spoken.

Forgive, just as Christ forgave you. This is what happens when the glory of Jesus' love fills us, his temples. We change into people who forgive just like him. We require no revenge or personal punishment against those who wrong us, but remove all retribution from our agenda. This is what God has done for us in the perfect life and death of his Son, and this is what we do for each other. And not once or seven times, but seventy times seven.

And, in addition to all these things, put on love, which ties things together in perfect unity. "Put on love" is simply another way of telling God's temples to be filled with the gospel's glory. The gospel is God's love in motion, his action proving his affection by providing the help we needed. When you are filled with that gospel love by listening to it, taking it into your hand and mouth, and returning to saving waters of your baptism, it ties together every other trait of a life Godly lived. Like your God, you will put love into motion for the good of those around you.

The glory of Jesus gospel also fills us with peace. What greater peace could you imagine than the peace in Simeon's heart as he sang in the temple, ready to leave this world confident of God's salvation? God calls us to peace when he calls us to faith in Jesus. It is peace inside of us, and peace expressed to our fellow believers. **Let the peace of Christ control your hearts, to which you were also called, in one body.** The gospel of Christ fills the heart with peace and drives away doubt and fear. And then it shows in our dealing with each other. Paul uses the picture of your body. When one part of your body is in pain, the rest adjusts to bring it peace. When your back hurts, your legs bend into a chair to rest it. When your head hurts, your hands move to rub it. The parts of a body naturally adjust to increase the peace of the whole body. And this is what the members of Jesus' body do. Where there is pain, where there is conflict, we move for peace.

The glory of God's salvation fills his temples, his saints, with glory. It is the glory of knowing our eternal fate, and also the glory of living a Jesus-like life, a life of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, deference, love and peace. And, of course, there will be thanksgiving. Faith in Jesus' salvation is God's best gift, and fills us with thanks for that gift and every other.

The way Paul ends next in these verses makes perfect sense: **Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish each other with all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.** This is a call for Christians to gather together for worship, to learn the Word of God together, and to express their faith to each other with word and song. In other words, it is a call for God's temples to be filled continually with the glory of Jesus' salvation. Every time we come together to receive the gospel in Word in sacrament, God rebuilds and renovates us, his temples. He fills us with the glory of Jesus' salvation over and over, more and more completely.

This is the final result: **And everything you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.** The Lord always fills his temples with glory. He filled Solomon's with the glory of his presence in a cloud. He filled another temple with the glory of his Son's salvation, to the delight of Simeon and Anna. He fills this temple with the glory of Jesus' salvation, too, through Word and sacraments. And he has filled the temple of your heart with Jesus' salvation by giving you faith. You are his temple, full of glory. Live in the glory of Jesus' gospel. Give glory to God in all the ways he desires, in everything you do. Amen.