

Jesus and the Temple
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
October 1, 2023 PM Sermon
Reverend Peter Jonker
John 2:13-25

In Texas, a sincere Christian man named Byron Stinson has been breeding red heifers. And not just any red heifer, a red heifer that meets the precise standards of Numbers 19. Numbers 19 is a little known passage (though I have preached on it at LaGrave) that talks about how the ashes of a perfectly red heifer are to be used as part of the cleansing rituals in the temple. Not only is Mr. Stinson breeding a red heifer, late last year reports came out that he had actually bred one that met the scriptural standard. Rabbis came over from Israel to inspect it, and with great excitement, gave it the seal of approval.

Why is Byron Stinson breeding a red heifer, and why is everyone excited about that? Because they think that this heifer will help bring about the end times. To be clear, it's not the heifer itself that will usher in the last days, it's what the heifer will make possible. The ashes of a perfectly red heifer are part of the purification process for the temple priests and the temple implements, so finding a perfectly red heifer would pave the way for a far more important event, the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. The building of the so-called Third Temple. The zeal for finding this red heifer comes from the belief that when a new temple is built in Jerusalem, it will usher in the end times; Christ will return and draw history to a close.

If you think this is some obscure belief way out on the fringes, you are wrong. There are many, many Christians, most of them in the dispensationalist stream or in the prophecy tradition, who believe that the temple in Jerusalem must be re-built in order for Christ to return. Here are the words of a very influential Christian, David Jeremiah. "Even now, [in preparation for the rebuilding of the temple] devout Jews are working on reproducing sacred temple vessels according to the Old Testament requirements. A breeding program aims to produce an unblemished red heifer that meets the requirements for purification of the temple. It gives me chills to hear how the groundwork is being laid for the End Times!" This is not a fringe belief. Millions of people hold these views. This story is big enough and there are enough people paying attention that it's made national news in Israel. Enough people believe it that the idea that the temple needs to be rebuilt on the temple mount is a BIG political issue in Israel and it shapes middle eastern policy in our own Congress.

Where do people get the idea that the Third Temple will bring about the end times? From the Old Testament prophets. Do you know your bible well enough to know the place in scripture where you here a prophecy about a new and glorious temple? The answer is Ezekiel. Ezekiel is a book that talks a lot about the temple. At the beginning of the book we hear about the destruction of the old temple. The people have been unfaithful and so at the beginning of the book, in Ezekiel 10, the prophet sees the glory of the Lord, sometimes called the Shekinah glory, depart from the temple. It's a national disaster. But at the end of the book, Ezekiel prophesies a new temple. God will not abandon his people forever! The glory of the Lord will return! In chapters 40-48, Ezekiel shares a glorious vision of a beautiful new temple where God will live forever. When God comes to that temple, the evil will be defeated, godness will be established and God will dwell with his people forever. The images of the prosperity and joy brought about by the building of the temple sound a lot like some of the imagery of the new creation described in the book of Revelation. So people read the vision of Ezekiel's temple and they think, "That's the third temple! That's the temple that must be built before Christ can return."

If you are in the stream of popular Christian media; radio, TV, social media, maybe you've heard about the red heifer and the idea of a third temple, and you've wondered, how come I never hear Peter and other Christian Reformed ministers talking about the rebuilding of the temple and the exciting news about the red heifer and its implications for the end times?? Well, there's a good answer. With all respect and love for my fellow believers who hold these views; these views are not what our church teaches, and more to the point, they are not what the Bible teaches. They are based on a misreading of Scripture. And tonight I want to go through the Bible and explain to you why our tradition has never believed that the third temple must be built before Christ can return.

When it comes to the relationship between Jesus and the temple, John 2 is a good place to start. In this story of Jesus cleaning the moneylenders and the merchants out of the temple we see two dimensions of Jesus' relationship with the temple. On the one hand Jesus is very pro-temple. The words of Psalm 69 are applied to him: "Zeal for your house shall consume me." Jesus is obviously passionate about the temple, otherwise he wouldn't have kicked out the moneychangers and the cattle merchants. Jesus' respect for the temple shows up in other places in the gospels too. He calls the temple his 'Father's house' in Luke 2, and 'the House of God' in Matthew 12. Jesus went to the temple to celebrate the Great feasts. Jesus is a supporter of the temple.

That's why the sign he chooses is somewhat surprising. When his accusers ask him about the authority he has to clear the temple, he says, "Knock the temple down and I'll build it up again in three days." Why would Jesus, who is actively protecting the temple worship with his actions here, suddenly turn around and tell them to knock the temple down? Why would he pick a sign that involves the destruction of the very thing he's currently protecting? The answer is that Jesus isn't just choosing a random sign, a random display of power; Jesus' sign is something that is actually going to happen. This temple, so beloved by the Jews and so beloved by Jesus, is going to be replaced. It will be destroyed and replaced by a new temple. And that temple will not be a temple made by human hands, because as Stephen says in his sermon before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7, 'the Lord of heaven does not ultimately dwell in temples made by human hands.' That temple will be Jesus himself. Jesus is the cornerstone of the new temple. "After he rose from the dead the disciples realized that the temple he had spoken of was his body." Jesus is the temple. Jesus is the third temple.

I think that's what this text teaches, but the theme runs much deeper than this text. Bear with me, and I will take you on a Scriptural tour and show you how the New Testament repeatedly teaches that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament expectations for a new temple.

Let's start with Jesus' words about rebuilding the temple in three days, that seems to point to his death and resurrection. Does the temple figure into the story of Jesus' crucifixion? Is the temple part of that? Yes, in three ways. First, remember one of the main accusations brought against Jesus at his trial: "This fellow said I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days." Jesus' accusers introduce the temple into the crucifixion proceedings.

The second temple reference comes at the moment Jesus dies. When Jesus gives up his spirit, the curtain of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom. In effect, Jesus' death does destroy the temple. Although I don't think destroy is the right word. I don't think Jesus would have said that his death destroys the temple, rather his death fulfills it. Because of his sacrifice for sin, the holy of holies is open to everyone. We don't need the old atonement sacrifices anymore. Everyone has access to the presence of God through the blood of Jesus. At the moment of Christ's death, the purpose of the temple is fulfilled. When the temple curtain rips, think of it as a seed bursting open and a shoot of new life emerging. This seed was always meant to sprout with this new growth and now the time for its germination has finally come.

The third temple reference is in John. John does not mention the torn curtain, but he has his own way of communicating that Jesus' death fulfills the temple's function. I preached on this for Easter this year. Remember how the way John describes the empty tomb makes it sound like the holy of holies. The empty table where Jesus lay has two two angels at each end; it looks like the ark of the covenant, which is kept in the holy of holies in the temple. The empty tomb is the holy of holies and Peter and John can walk right in. That's John's way of telling us that the purpose of the temple has been fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus. We don't need the priests to perform the day of atonement ritual in the temple anymore, Christ's sacrifice has taken care of forgiveness once and for all. That's why verse 22 says, after he was raised from the dead the disciples realized that the temple he was talking about was the temple of his body. Jesus fulfills the temple in himself.

While Jesus' death and resurrection are probably the best places to show how the temple is fulfilled in Jesus, there are lots of other places that confirm and deepen that link. And I want to share some of these with you because, not only do they make my point, they also show the richness of the Bible.

John 1. John announces who Jesus is with that famous chapter on the word. In that chapter John says of Jesus, the word became flesh and dwelt among us, only the word he chooses for 'dwelt' is a little unusual. It's the word skenoo, which literally means to camp, to tent. It's a word used to describe the setting up of the tabernacle, which is why some people have said you could translate it as the word became flesh and 'tabernacled' among us. Why did the Holy Spirit lead John to choose this word? Probably because the function

of the tabernacle and the temple is fulfilled in Jesus. Do you remember the very next phrase John uses after that? The word became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we have seen his glory. Glory. That's a tabernacle/temple word too. When the tabernacle is completed at the end of Exodus, the glory cloud of God's presence moves into the tabernacle. John is saying that Jesus is the tent and he's the glory of God in our midst. He's the new temple.

Here's another place. In John 4, Jesus talks to the Samaritan woman at the well. As part of their conversation she asks Jesus about the correct place of worship. The Samaritans said the proper place of worship was in Samaria, the Jews said no, the correct place of worship is the temple in Jerusalem. Who's right? The woman asked Jesus. Is it the temple, or Samaria? Remember Jesus' answer? First he says salvation is from the Jews, which is basically him saying, the Jews were right. The temple was the proper place of worship. But then he goes on to say: "a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither here nor in Jerusalem. The time is coming when you will worship in Spirit and in truth." True worship of God will no longer be confined to one building or one place. Wherever two or three are gathered, Jesus is there with them. Jesus fulfills the temple and when the Spirit comes, we can access his glory, his presence, his grace anywhere. Jesus is the new temple.

In John chapter 7, we see Jesus at the feast of tabernacles. The feast of tabernacles included a water ritual. Each day a priest would take water from the pool of Siloam and pour it over the altar. On the seventh day the water was poured over the altar 7 times. This water was meant to symbolize the river of living water that was prophesied in Ezekiel's temple. In Ezekiel 47, the prophet's vision includes the vision of a massive, life-giving river that pours from the temple and brings life to the whole land. It's strong enough to turn the Dead sea into a green paradise teeming with life. The outpouring of water is meant to look forward to the water that would pour from Ezekiel's temple. In John 7, do you remember what Jesus does at the feast? On the seventh day of the feast Jesus stands up in the middle of the festival and he says in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." The Scripture he's referring to is Ezekiel 47 (and also Zechariah 14 where you will also find a reference to the river of life) and he's saying that great river that flows from the temple, that's going to flow from me! I am the fulfillment of Ezekiel's temple.

One more evidence. What was the temple's function in Old Testament Israel? It conferred forgiveness for sins. It offered ritual cleanliness. It was the place that you went to see God, to meet him, as in Psalm 27: 'I long to dwell in the house of the Lord, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord.' Already in his earthly ministry, before his death and resurrection, Jesus begins to take all these temple functions upon himself. He tells people that he has the authority to forgive sins. He has the power to touch and clean the lepers, and when it comes to seeing God, in John 14:9 he tells his disciples "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." If you want to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, you don't go to the temple, you look at Jesus. Everything that the temple does is accomplished and fulfilled in Jesus.

In the letters of Peter and Paul, this sense of Jesus as the fulfillment of the temple is extended to the rest of Christ's body. Jesus fulfills the temple and his death and resurrection are the foundation of a new temple, which is us. In Christ, and because of Christ, we are the temple of God. Ephesians 2: built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone...the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple to the Lord." I Peter 2 says that we are like living stones and built on Christ our cornerstone, "we are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices to God." Jesus is the fulfillment of the temple and in him we become part of the temple too.

All this points to the book of Revelation, and specifically to the passage we read earlier in the service, Revelation 21. "I did not see any temple in the city," says John. Why not? "Because the Lord God almighty and the lamb are its temple."

What I do want to say is this; the Bible is clear. The third temple is just what our passage says it is. The third temple is Jesus and his body. Ezekiel 47 and all the Old Testament prophecies that talk about a fabulous new temple are prophecies that point to Jesus. He is the fulfillment of all those hopeful visions. We shouldn't expect another building.

I chose to do this sermon as a way to address a very specific theological issue that isn't always the same as what you hear in the popular Christian media stream. But as I studied, part of what hit me, what blessed me is the picture of the complete sufficiency of Christ. We don't need to build temples or breed heifers to bring about

his purposes; all is accomplished in him! All the old testament streams flow into him! He is the temple, the place where we go to meet God. He is the high priest who offers the sacrifice that frees us from our sins, and makes us new. He's not just the priest he's the sacrifice whose blood redeems us, he's the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He's our king and Lord who rules our life and whom we obey; he's the obedient servant, who's perfect righteousness and obedience is imputed to us. He's our judge, the one who will pronounce judgment over the living and the dead, but he's also the accused, the one who faces the charges we should have faced, the one who receives our death sentence while we walk out of the courtroom alive and free. He truly is, as Colossians 1 says, the one in whom all things hold together. He is our alpha and our omega. Blessed are those who enter his courts and take refuge in him.

©Rev. Peter Jonker