Homily for Lent 3B

March 7, 2021

S. Stephen’s, Providence

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Location, location, location.

You’ve heard that phrase before.

Location, location, location.

In real estate, the biggest determining factor of property value is its location.

Just consider what someone will pay for a postage stamp-sized condo

in Manhattan or Provincetown,

compared with a 4 -bedroom house with a yard somewhere non-descript:

or the value of ocean front property compared with a plot in central Iowa.

It’s all about location.

Location is important.

Places are important – they have value, and they hold meaning.

For thousands upon thousands of years,

humans have gravitated towards certain sites on the earth

that held special importance or religious significance.

The ancient Israelites and the Israel of Jesus’ day were no different.

Their emphasis upon the Jerusalem Temple as the dwelling place of God

was central to their faith.

Location is, in a way, central to the Gospel of John as well.

The Gospel of John has as one of its driving themes a radical shift in location.

At the end of the first chapter of John,

Jesus tells Nathaniel that he will see angels ascending and descending

upon the Son of Man.

This is an allusion to the vision of Jacob in the Old Testament,

in which Jacob has a dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder,

causing him to cry out, “Truly the Lord is in this place!

This is none other than the house of God!”

In other words, Jesus is telling Nathaniel that he, Jesus, the Son of Man,

is now that ladder in Jacob’s dream:

Jesus himself is the meeting place of heaven and earth:

he is God come down to man, very God incarnate.

In the Fourth Chapter of John’s Gospel,

Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well.

Again, location becomes a key point:

for the Samaritans worshipped on a nearby mountain,

as opposed to Jerusalem.

When the Samaritan woman brings up this huge dividing issue

between her people and Jesus’s people,

he says to her, ‘Woman, believe me,

the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain

nor in Jerusalem.

… the hour is coming, and is now here,

when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth …

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’

Of course, with Jesus, the hour is indeed here.

He is saying to her none of these locations matters anymore –

because of course, he himself is the new location of God:

he, and not the Temple,

is the place in which people can come to and encounter the Living God

dwelling in their very midst.

So today, in our reading from the Second Chapter of John,

we find ourselves confronted with location and its purposes:

we encounter Jesus coming into the Jerusalem Temple,

which he will describe as his Father’s house – this very, very important location.

In order to buy unblemished animals for the required sacrifices,

payment must be rendered that doesn’t have any graven image on it.

Most coinage would have the image of the Roman emperor on it, mind you;

and so money changers were required

to exchange Roman currency for Temple currency.

This happened in a location within the Temple precinct

known as the Court of the Gentiles –

a place where non-Jews could enter and pray.

This was the location deemed suitable for this essential part of the Temple system.

This marketplace of animals and coinage was in fact necessary

to maintain the Temple religion, and to fulfill the Law of Moses.

So we may well wonder why Jesus takes the dramatic and forceful action

which we have heard this morning.

Why does he become consumed with zeal,

and drive out people and livestock with a whip of cords,

as he proceeds to overturn tables and send coins spilling every which way?

Well on one hand,

Jesus is in this moment standing in the long line of prophets

who have used forceful and dramatic gestures to speak out

against the Temple system and the ruling hierarchy.

Interestingly enough,

Jesus is not attacked or arrested when he does this hugely upsetting thing:

instead they ask him for a sign.

“What sign can you show us for doing this?”

They must have been hearing in their heads the words of the prophet Malachi,

“The Lord whom ye seek will suddenly come to his temple.”

They can concede that someone would come and perform this act,

but what sign can Jesus give that he is the one?

In typical fashion for the Gospel of John,

Jesus responds in a way that is at once both straightforward and misunderstood.

He tells them that if they would destroy this temple,

he will raise it again in three days.

The temple authorities scoff:

“This temple has been under construction for 46 years,

and you will raise it up in 3 days?” “Yeah right – what are you on?”

But they have misunderstood the location of which Jesus speaks,

for he is referring to the true location of the true Temple,

which is his body.

They will later come to believe that they have destroyed it –

that this troublesome Jesus is dead and gone.

But we know the ending of the story – that this Temple is indeed raised

on the third day.

I believe there are a few key implications for us this morning.

First of all,

with this being our first Sunday of in-person worship since mid-November,

those of us here in this building are very aware of location,

and the importance or significance of location.

This building and this space are very important to us.

And yet our Gospel reading today and our own experiences in this pandemic

have reminded us that God is not contained to one location:

to worship God is to worship in spirit and truth –

your worship of God and adoration of Jesus in the sacrament

was not stopped from occurring

simply because you could not be in this location.

After all the true location of your worship is not a building, but it in your heart.

Secondly, if we consider Jesus’s righteous anger at the money changers

within the Temple precincts,

and his dismay at the prioritization of the Temple economy

over and against the worship of God,

we might also be reminded that,

while fiscal health and adequate income are necessary,

they should never become the priority or focus:

following Jesus and seeking to participate in God’s mission

should always be priority number one.

Third, and most importantly, we are reminded on this day

in which we have returned to our own temple of sorts,

this building so lovingly built and maintained,

that it has all been done to point us to one thing and one thing only:

Jesus.

Everything about this building as you enter from the back

is meant to draw your attention to the high altar,

and the sanctuary lamp indicating the presence of the Blessed Sacrament

within the tabernacle above the altar.

And yet our Gospel reading this morning requires us to take a moment –

to take a step back and consider again location:

where is the location of the true temple, the meeting place of God and man?

Where is the location of our worship?

The answer of course is Jesus – but to press on this question a little further:

where is the location of this encounter?

Is it simply restricted to the altar?

Is it about the consecrated hosts and God’s abiding presence?

Well, yes – sure.

But if you ask me, the truer location of all this is the moment

when that host is placed in your hand,

and eventually, when that cup once again passes to your lips.

The Sacrament and this Eucharistic celebration

are robbed of their fullest meaning if we forget

that the true location of what they are about

is in the space between each other:

for me, your priest, the highlight of my week and of every mass

is placing the sacrament in your hands.

There are no words to express the wonder that the living presence of God,

God the creator of the worlds and who is beyond all time and space,

also exists under the forms of bread and wine:

and within this sacred meal that we share together.

It is about the love of God that we experience in that moment of sharing

in that sacred banquet:

the assurance that God loves us, embraces us,

and chooses to come to us again and again.

The true location of that sacrament

is not just within the bread and wine:

it is in the sharing of it together.

In that moment, there is Jacob’s ladder,

with angels ascending and descending.

In that moment of sharing and receiving the Eucharist,

there is that moment of God being joined with humanity once more,

through Jesus, the true meeting place of God and man.

Because of Jesus as the true location of our worship,

Jesus who is beyond all time and space,

we worship in Spirit and Truth,

“for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.”

So on this Third Sunday in Lent,

when perhaps I should be preaching about sinfulness

and the things that separate us from God,

I instead find myself giving thanks for our corporate return

to this location,

grateful that we can once more share in this sacred meal together

as we prepare for Holy Week and Easter.

May we enter into the Temple which is Christ Jesus with grateful

and adoring hearts.

It is, as they say, all about location:

what a privilege that our hearts are counted worthy to be such prime real estate.

As I say in the Sacristy at the end of every Mass:

+Blessed, praised, hallowed, and adored be Jesus Christ on his Throne of Glory in Heaven, in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar, and in the hearts of all His faithful people. Amen.