

Proper 28, Year C

- I am a sucker for church buildings
- I am a sucker for sacred architecture
- I love the feel of sacred space that has, over the course of years, or decades, or centuries, been painted with prayer until the air inside them is absolutely thick with it
- I love the way the entire world seems to grow still in churches as though all creation knows they approach the altar and throne of our Most High God and I also love the joyful noises that people – especially young people – make in churches as they revel in the presence of the God-who-is-with-us
- I love the way that we tell stories in glass and stone and carved wood and architecture, and I love seeing which stories we’ve decided to tell in our different churches – which ones we thought central enough to make a permanent fixture
- I just **love** church buildings
- So I can understand the unnamed people who are central to the way our Gospel passage begins this morning, can understand them talking about the temple, and about how it was adorned
- And I can imagine their shock and horror when Jesus responds to them by saying, “the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”
- Jesus has a habit of doing this, a habit of saying that our sacred cows aren’t so sacred – that our priorities are out of whack
- And it’s true
- It was true then, and Jesus was issuing a warning about what was going to happen – what was, at that point, inevitable – the temple was going to fall – bad things were going to happen
- The warning was not only that these things were going to happen, but in context, part of the warning was that they were going to be all the more devastating because of the extreme attachment to the temple
- Our relationship to our buildings can sometimes border on the unhealthy
- That goes for those unnamed people who were talking about the temple, and if we aren’t careful it easily extends to us today
- At their best, our church buildings, our sacred architecture help to convey a sense of permanence, a fleeting glance of the eternal – the stones a reminder of God’s steadfast presence

- At their best, our sacred works of art help give us at least a hint of the majesty and beauty of God
- At their best, these places have a part to play in helping us understand the unfathomable depths of meaning in the word 'Incarnation'
- But at their worst, if we become too attached to them, too focused on them, all these things can leave us with the impression that this is the only place we encounter God – that God lives here, and here alone
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- We live in a time when a lot of the Christian world is changing
- You've probably heard stories on the news or elsewhere even outside of church about how church attendance is, generally speaking, in something of a decline
- Part of the problem is that we can no longer just relax and depend on peer pressure and social expectation to bring everyone streaming into the doors of our churches – and there are a lot of feelings in the church about that
- There are also a lot of opinions about that
- You will hear plenty of people say things about these beautiful buildings of ours
- Things like, "the future of the church is outside of church buildings" – or, "the future of the church is churches that never even have buildings, never even build buildings"
- And every time I hear that, I recoil a little bit
- I recoil not only because I'm inherently wary and even a little skeptical of anytime someone tells me of a singular, monolithic future of the Church
- But I recoil because I know what a healthy understanding of our Church buildings can bring
- These spaces were all meant to form us – not just to lecture us or tell us stories, but to help us learn and to help shape us into people who have a greater understanding of God
- So I don't get excited about the prospect of a future for the Church that has no buildings, no sacred space set aside for worship of our God
- But I also understand where such a sentiment comes from
- If we aren't careful, we end up exactly where the people at the beginning of our Gospel did
- Focused more on the trappings of our churches than on the God who is found in them – and also found outside of them
- If we aren't careful, and we end up thinking that God is contained within these four walls, then we have made this not a church but a tomb

- If we worship God in here once a week among these reminders of wood and glass and stone, and not the other six days among the people, out in the world, then these walls might as well be brought down
- If we think our God only inhabits stone, and not flesh, then not one stone should be left on one another
- We can never forget that our God inhabits flesh every bit as much as stone
- We can never forget that our worship takes place not just here among **this** sacred space – but out there, in the sacred space of all creation
- Our church buildings are beautiful and deeply important places, places that orient us toward God, help train and shape us into a people who love God
- But it is very difficult to love our neighbors with a building
- It's very difficult to worship God in the world from within these walls
- So I pray that what happened to the temple does not happen to our church buildings, especially this one
- I am grateful for church buildings that help point us toward God, toward love of God
- But we can never stop there, can never think for even an instant that God remains here when we go out into the world