

**Sermon: Smashing Idols 1 Corinthians 8:1-6 Mark 1:16-20 January 31, 2021
Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa - Rev. Steve Clifton**



A few years ago, a pilgrimage group from our congregation had the opportunity to visit a very holy place ... the Western Wall in Jerusalem, a part of the Temple Mount in the Holy City,

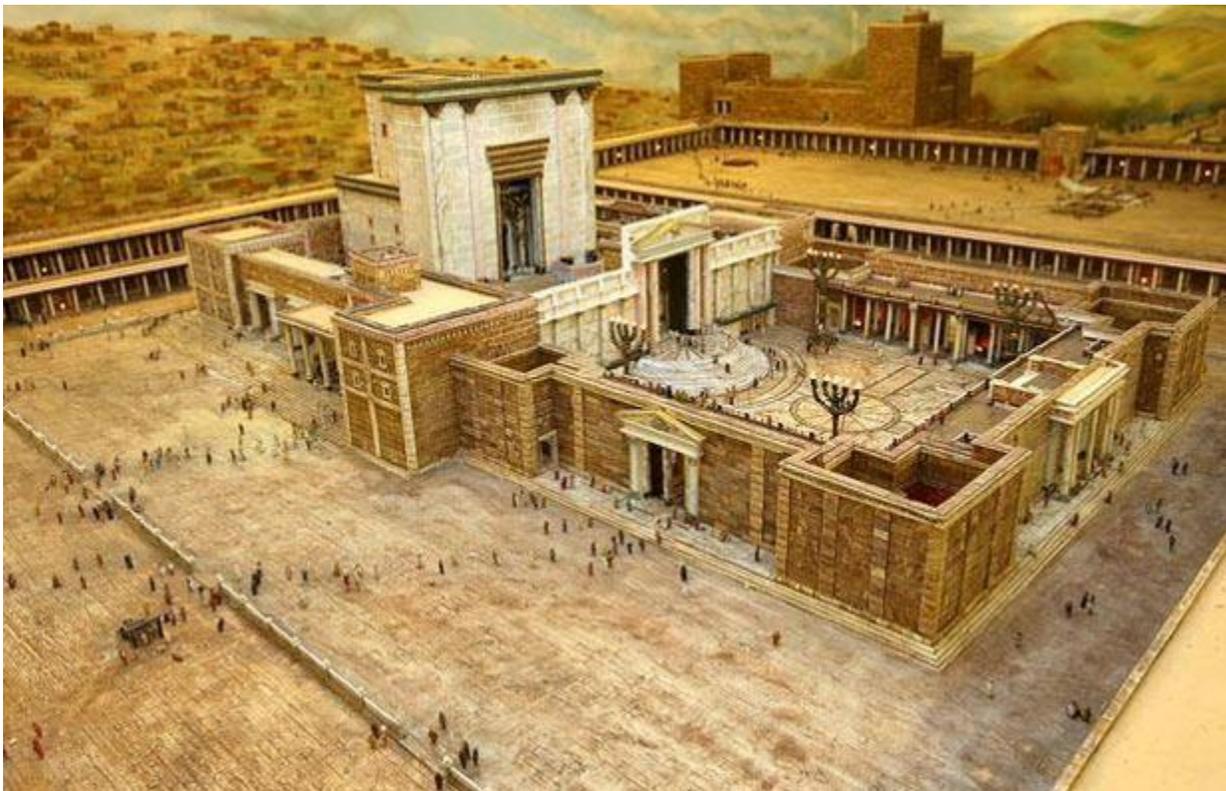
While the last Jewish temple to stand in Jerusalem was torn down in 70CE by Rome`s legions, still stones that Herod`s builders put in place long ago remain.



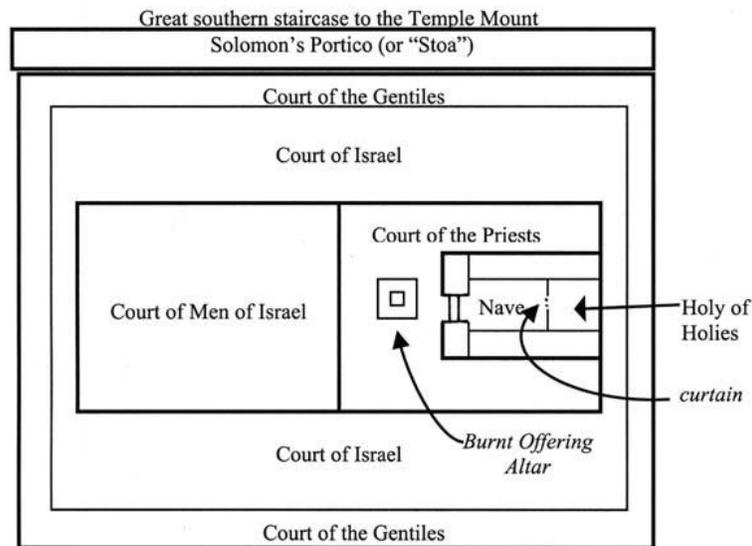
The Mount is a place revered by Moslems as one of the holiest places beyond Mecca.



In the Jewish tradition the Temple Mount is *the* Holiest of places. When you enter the Temple precinct today, a sign signed by the chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, reminds you that this is a place “where the Divine Presence always rests.” In the Jewish tradition, God is not confined to a particular place but the temple precinct is a place of particular meeting, a place where the glory of God particularly dwells.



In the time of Jesus and of Paul the Temple was the focus of Jewish life. The God of Israel was not confined to a time and place, but the Temple was a place of particular meeting. The Divine Presence was felt, encountered in the Temple precinct in a special way.



The Temple was constructed with degrees of holiness: the gentile court let you close to the holy of holies, the women's court closer still, the men's court closer and the priest's court closer still.

And at the heart of the Temple was a place where Israel's God was really especially present. The center of the Temple was the holy of holies – ground zero for God's presence ...

The holy of holies was so sacred that only the High priest could enter and then only once a year

And what was in the Holiest place. Separated by a curtain from the rest of the temple? What did the high Priest find when he entered the holy of holies.

Nothing.

No candles. No furnishings. No altars. No flowers. No statues. No artistic depictions. Nothing. In Jesus day, in the time of Paul, the Holy of Holies was... empty.

In the temples of Antiquity it would have been very strange, to have a holy, holy place and have it empty. Especially, it would have been strange that there were no idols there. The Temples of Egypt, of Babylon, of Sumer, of Greece of Rome, of Persia... all would have been full of idols.

But in the Jewish tradition there were no idols. The third commandment of the 10 reads: You shall not make for yourself an idol... The God of Israel was Holy, other, beyond capture or depiction, description or representation.

And the Christian tradition carries this idea forward: we know that as Paul writes in the epistle shared today “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “There is no God but one.”

So maybe your home is free of literal idols; we don't have graven images of Aphrodite or Marduk to venerate at home but idols are still something we build. Christian writer Peter Rollins claims that all people including people of faith have idols that we make and remake. Not stone statues maybe. But concrete concepts of the divine.

We reduce God to a set of ideas. To a collection of concepts. To a particular way of thinking. To a formula of beliefs. All idolatry says Rollins. God is Holy. Other, Greater than all of it...

Rollins writes: God is not an object that we must love, but is a mystery present in the very act of love itself.

God does not exist he writes. God is that in which all else exists.

Whatever we think of God, God is more.

Whatever we believe of God, God transcends those beliefs.

God is bigger than any idol we still might want to make. The Holy of Holies should still be empty. That is the wisdom of our tradition

What do we think about God? About how to approach God? - What do we think a good xn looks like? What is the right way to pray? What is our image of Jesus – ☺do we picture a blonde haired blue eyed Swede?

What are the right songs to sing? What is the right way to gather? Who are the right people to include?

Some in this current moment would claim that if the church doesn't meet together in person it is not being faithful? What certainties do we live with in our life of faith?

Are there idols we have built? Things we cling to that stand between us and the great mystery that is God? Do we focus too much on a construct, an ideal, an image, a preconception? Does any of this keep us from going deeper into the mystery of faith?

And...our idols outside of faith are many... Those of faith and those with no faith we all build idols. Nationalism makes an idol of our country. Racism makes an idol of a race. Politics can make an idol of a leader. We make all kinds of things sacred, pledge loyalty to all kinds of unworthy causes and limited ideas and ideologies. We dedicate our lives to all manner of lesser things...we are forever constructing world views and certainties, making idols...

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This is the season of Epiphany. An epiphany is an “aha” moment. A time when our preconceptions are challenged. Our minds are blown. Our hearts are opened. Our idols are shattered...

In Mark's gospel today Jesus calls disciples to follow and as he leads them they watch as Jesus shatters conventions – In the verses following what Gaveen read today Jesus touches an unclean leper to heal him, eats with tax collectors and sinners to the derision of religious leaders. Jesus is condemned by these leaders as he harvests and heals on the Sabbath. Jesus crosses borders and travels into Gentile country and heals an exiled man shunned by his community ...

Jesus calls and says follow me. It's not an invitation to sit and be still but to journey, it's not about being static and certain, it's about movement and learning...

American activist Shane Claiborne was raised in a conservative American brand of Christianity. He is a peace activist, campaigns against state violence, opposing the death penalty. He converts guns into garden tools, literally echoing Isaiah's vision of God beating swords into ploughshares He helped to found the New Monastic movement in Philadelphia, and lives in community among the poor in that city
He writes of how Jesus shattered his idols, messed with his preconceptions
He writes

“I know there are people out there who say, “My life was such a mess. ... and then I met Jesus, and my whole life came together.” God bless those people. But for me, I had it together...Then I met Jesus, and He wrecked my life.

The more I read the gospel, the more it messed me up, turning everything I believed in, valued and hoped for upside down. I am still recovering from my conversion.

No idol is real writes Paul.

Jesus invites us to follow, going deeper, maybe shattering some idols along the way.

The United Church's song of faith, our most contemporary framing of *what we believe* begins with these words

*God is Holy Mystery, beyond complete knowledge,
above perfect description.*

Yet,

in love,

the one eternal God seeks relationship....

We cannot keep from singing....