

Solomon's Temple was built to be a permanent place for God's people to encounter the holy presence of God. Up to this point in Israel's history, worship had been in the tabernacle, or portable tent that the Israelites carried throughout their wilderness journey.

Solomon's father David wanted to build the Temple. But because of the violence of his reign, God did not allow him to build it. It would perhaps have created an unholy stain on a holy place. Today's message will focus on what makes a place holy...and what might make a place unholy.

But, first, today is also the observation of the Protestant Reformation. So, a little Reformation trivia. We Lutherans trace the Reformation back to Martin Luther posting his 95 Theses on the door of Wittenburg Castle on October 31, 1519. History also uses that marker. Generally, I believe John Calvin is a bigger player for Presbyterians.

But has anyone here been to the Czech Republic? In particular, Prague?

Does anyone know whose memorial statue stands in the Old Town square in Prague?

It's Jan Hus. 100 years before either Luther or Calvin, Jan Hus was a Bohemian reformer who was sharply critical of what he saw as the moral decay of the Church. His protests were very similar to those of Luther, even though Luther gets the credit for starting the reformation. Maybe it's because whereas Martin Luther managed to avoid martyrdom, Jan Hus was burned at the stake in 1415.

Reformation has always been about calling people back to be the people God wants us to be. That usually involves confronting powerful people who benefit from the status quo. And that has its risks.

The picture on the front of the bulletin is St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The Church of Luther's time sold indulgences – essentially they put divine mercy up for sale. The indulgences were in part to raise money to build St. Peter's. That was one of many practices Martin Luther saw as corrupt.

The Basilica was built through exploitation of people in the church...a pretty unholy beginning. And yet it's viewed by people the world over as a truly holy place – a place where tradition says the Apostle Peter is buried. It's a pilgrimage destination for millions every year.

All over Europe there are massive cathedrals built over decades. They are designed to evoke awe and a sense of heaven and the holy presence of God. They are indeed holy

places. But they are also very extravagant and in the eyes of some, a waste of resources that they feel could have been used for the holy cause of helping people in need.

The same could be said about Solomon's Temple.

So what makes a place holy? What makes a place unholy? Can a place be both?

Between the first and second parts of today's reading are 3 and a half chapters of detailed descriptions of the construction of the Temple and its furnishings. It describes a very lavish building designed to evoke awe.

Other religious temples of the area would have had various idols displayed, but in Solomon's Temple, the artwork depicted God's creation. There is a real sense of the holy in the building itself.

But what really makes the temple holy is what we read in the second part of today's reading. The Ark of the Covenant, the tablets which lay out God's commandments, was placed in the holiest place in the Temple.

That Covenant was meant to shape the people's relationship with God and with each other. The Temple becomes filled with the presence of God.

The people didn't believe that God's presence was restricted to the temple. But it was a place where God's presence was more tangible.

And the people gather to worship as a community. They gather to be reminded what it meant to be God's people...they gathered to be continually shaped by God's covenant with them.

So, the presence of God I would say is the primary marker of holiness. We know that God is present everywhere, so in that sense all creation is holy.

But a place where God's presence is felt, where God's word is spoken, and where the gathered community responds with worship is a place set aside specifically to be holy. And Solomon's Temple was holy.

But can a holy place also be unholy? Solomon used conscripted forced labor to build it. It cost an enormous amount of money which had to be extracted from the people. So, even from the beginning, the Temple was tainted ever so slightly.

After Solomon, things really went downhill. Solomon's son was even harsher with the people. The northern tribes of Israel split away from him and the southern tribe of Judah. From then on, both Israel and Judah both pretty much went off the rails.

The kings failed to lead the people according to their covenant with God.

Idolatry crept in, and with it the failure to follow the commandments and the way of life that would have seen to the needs of all, but especially the poor, the widow, the orphan, the sick, the elderly.

The Temple priests too often backed the kings rather than calling them back to their covenant with God.

God raised up prophets to call the rulers and people back to be the holy people God wanted them to be. And one of the things the prophets spoke against was actually the people's worship in the Temple.

They maintained the appearance of holiness with their worship songs and praise. God's word was read to them. But their lives were anything but holy. The Temple became a place that too easily colluded with powerful but corrupt rulers.

The commandments were neglected. Their worship was false, said the prophets. The Temple was still holy in that God was present there. But now it became thoroughly stained with unholiness. This Temple will ultimately be destroyed by the Babylonians, and the understanding will be that it was God's doing.

The temptation of religious leaders to pair up with rulers and those in power has been a pretty constant thread running throughout the history of God's people.

The Christian church's worst corruption began when Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official state religion of Rome. The leadership of the church came to be indistinguishable from the empire.

The churches – those grand cathedrals of Europe – were built as holy places. They were built to evoke the awe of heaven and a sense of God's presence. Holy worship did happen in those cathedrals.

But the church became too wedded to the power of the Empire. Like Solomon, the Pope extracted money from people.

The early reformers all spoke against the church and its use of power to threaten people with damnation...to demand money from people who could ill afford it to ensure their salvation.

The Reformation was all about calling the Church back to holiness...to be a place where the mercy and grace of God were proclaimed... a God who became human, suffered, died, and was raised for our salvation. Where true faith and trust could be shaped and nurtured...where lives could be transformed so that the people would once again live according to God's way.

That is all still true today. The church is always in need of reforming.

This place is a holy place. It's a place where the Word of Christ crucified and risen is proclaimed. It's a place where faith is formed and nurtured. It's a place where the risen Christ is truly present in the Word and in the sacraments.

It's a place where countless lives have been shaped...where baptisms and marriages of generations have happened. It's a place where our loved ones have been buried.

It is a holy place because God meets us here and we are once again reminded that God is always with us.

As long as the Church – and now I'm talking big C church – shapes people who live by God's way, it remains a holy place. As long as it is a place that shapes people in love it is a holy place.

But when the church becomes too in love with power...when the church worships a god that is more of their own making than the God of Christ crucified and risen...when the worship of the church doesn't lead to lives of love and mercy...that church becomes an unholy place.

In the end, I'm going to go pretty solidly with Martin Luther here. We are all both sinner and saint. We are both holy and unholy. The church is always both holy and unholy.

It is Christ who makes us and the church holy, not anything we do or don't do. It is Christ's love for us that continues to shape us in our lives of faith...and it is Christ's love that calls us continually back to be the holy people...and the holy church...God created us to be.