

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, April 06, 2025

The Fifth Sunday In Lent

Solemn Evensong

4:00 pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Matthew Moretz

on
Hebrews 10:19-25

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The Temple: The Holy of Holies

Part of our Lent 2025 Sunday Evensong sermon series "The Temple of Jerusalem".

This morning we come to the end of a long wandering: a Lenten journey through the Temple in Jerusalem. Week by week we've explored its courts and colonnades. And now we've come to its center. The place behind the veil. The Holy of Holies.

The Holy of Holies, that innermost sanctuary at the heart of the Jerusalem Temple, is not merely a historical footnote or a relic of distant religious practice. It is, rather a window through which the light of another world spilled. It is the old world's way of speaking about something it could not hold in words. A drama of absence and presence. Of silence and a single word spoken clear. And all of it finds its echo, and its fulfillment, in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

900 years before Christ's birth, King Solomon built a house for God, a Temple of splendor to convey the divine glory. Gold on every wall. Cedar from Lebanon, carved and fragrant. And at the very heart, a cube—a perfect cube, the Holy of Holies—where heaven stooped low enough to brush the dust of the earth. There stood the Ark, gleaming and terrible. Within it, the tablets of the Law, cold and smooth, inscribed with the Ten Commandments. Above it, golden cherubim, wings outstretched, not to fly but to guard. Not to guard God from man, but man from God. For there, they said, the Lord himself would dwell, enthroned. In reality. Among them.

Yet, the sheer holiness of this space meant that no one walked in lightly. No one passed that veil save one man. Only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, could the High Priest enter, robed not in finery but humility—simple linen garments—and bearing incense and blood. In solemnity, he moved behind the heavy, richly woven veil. Here, amid fragrant clouds of incense, he sprinkled blood upon the mercy seat, for himself and for his people, a wordless plea for the mercy of a holy God upon a people who could not keep the law. Year by year, it was done. In trembling silence. And they knew, in that place, that the mercy of God was not an idea. It was a presence.

But time passed. Even the holiest things burn. The Temple fell. And when they built it again—this Second Temple, risen from the ruins of exile: it looked the part. Stones upon stones, white and shining in the sun. The court, the altar, the veil: all set back in place. But something was missing. The Ark holding the Covenant Tablets was gone. No one knew where. Hidden, lost, carried off by conquerors or by angels: no one could say. The cloud was gone too, the Shekhinah, that ancient sign of God's presence like fire and

fog. And in its place: only silence. Only the bare stone floor where the Ark had stood. It was not a ruin, but it was empty.

Yet even that emptiness held a strange weight. Not despair. Something else. It was as if the silence itself had become a kind of presence. As if God had gone deeper, beyond sight and sound. Now faith had to grow up. No more gold to dazzle the eyes. No more cloud to mark the way. Just the promise. Just the word.

The High Priest still went in once a year, dressed in linen, incense in hand, blood in a bowl. But now he poured it on a low stone. No Ark. No mercy seat. And still he prayed that what once was full can be full again. And so the emptiness of the Holy of Holies became prophecy. A shadow thrown ahead of greater things to come.

Here we approach the heart of our reflection. This empty sanctuary of the Second Temple foreshadows the mystery of Christ. The Letter to the Hebrews says it plainly. Christ is the true High Priest, who enters the true sanctuary, the heavenly one, Not once a year, but once for all. Not bearing the blood of beasts, but his own. At the very moment of his crucifixion, God tore the heavy veil of the Temple in two: And through that torn veil we see within at last, the mercy not made with hands, not just a frame, but a door. Christ entered the true Holy of Holies, the one that cannot be burned or broken. And he brings us in with him.

And so it is that the emptiness of the Holy of Holies becomes the kin of another emptiness—a tomb on Easter morning, broken open just as the veil had been torn. No stone tablets now. No golden Ark. Just linen quietly folded. And light. And the absence that speaks louder than presence.

The Ark's disappearance from the Holy of Holies marked a turning. A shift from the seen to the unseen. From symbol to spirit. From certainty to trust. And so too the empty tomb. It tells us that God is not held in boxes or buildings. That holiness walks now in flesh and breath and breaks bread at dusty tables.

Here at Saint Thomas' we do not shy away from the beauty of holiness. We bless it and we lift up our eyes to it. Carved wood and stone, shining glass, incense, vestments: none of it is meant to distract. All of it points. All of it says: *Look, look deeper.*

But the veil has been torn, beloved. And the center of the mystery of Creation is not an object, but a person. The lesson of the empty room and the empty tomb, is this: do not mistake the wrapping for the gift. Reverence, yes, but not idolatry. Beauty, yes, but not blindness. Christ does not dwell in symbols alone. He comes in Word and Sacrament, silence and song, broken bread and the poured cup. Not once a year, but always. Not behind a veil, but before us.

He is the new Holy of Holies. His body, the Ark. His cross, the mercy seat. His blood, our peace.

Saint Paul speaks plain and beautiful: *You are God's temple, and God's Spirit dwells within you.* Not gilded wood now. Not stone fitted by chisel. But hearts. Beating, breaking, believing. The dwelling of God is no longer bound by curtain or ark. He has moved inside us. Into the sinews of our living. Into the secret places. This changes everything. It means love is liturgy. Mercy is a hymn. Justice is sacrament. Every graced moment joins the offering, our bodies, our days, our sorrow and joy, lifted like incense into the presence of the Holy. We are living sacrifices burning with the fire of the Spirit, burning but not consumed.

But we must not stop at the threshold. The holy things are holy not because they are beautiful, but because they point. And they point to Christ. The invisible, eternal Christ, who meets us in bread and

wine, in water and word, in silence, in song, in the long ache of waiting, and in the sudden joy of being found.

And when the signs fall quiet and the soul feels dry as bone, the old truth still holds: God does not leave. He does not abandon. The Israelites once stood before the empty sanctuary and still they prayed. So too do we. Not because we see, but because we trust. And that trust is not hollow. It is built on the One who passed behind the veil and did not return empty-handed.

This is our calling. To walk with one another through that silence. To sit with each other in the dark and whisper the old stories. To light even a small flame when someone's fire is low. The Spirit does not depart. Christ is never far. And the temple of God, his living temple, is still being built. In us.

And, at the last, the vision rises, clear as morning, fierce as flame. Saint John the Divine, eyes lit by heaven's fire, sees the end that is also the beginning. A new Jerusalem. And in it, no temple. For God himself, and Christ the Lamb, are its temple. The Holy of Holies is no longer hidden. It spreads across every stone, every street, every breath. There are no veils now. No dividing curtain. No high priest slipping in through incense smoke. Only presence. Only light. And in that light, we shall see God face to face, and not die. All things are touched and filled by him. And we shall be his people, and he shall be our God.

That is where we're headed. That is the horizon toward which our pilgrimage leans. From Solomon's golden sanctuary to the bare stone floor of the Second Temple. From the silence of the empty tomb to the shout of Alleluia in a garden. This story is yours. It is the journey of every one who follows the light beyond the veil.

Each place along the way calls us deeper. Into trust. Into the mystery. Into the long love of God.

For in our Lord Jesus Christ, the veil is not just torn, it is taken away. He opens the sanctuary not just to the high priest but to all. He lays himself bare in broken body and spilled blood, to be known. And yet, he remains mystery still. Not to hide, but to invite. Always deeper. Always further in.

So let us come. Not proud, but not afraid. Not full, but not empty either. We come hungry, we come hopeful. We come with the dust of our past, the wonder of our youth. The sanctuary is open. The mercy seat waits. And Christ, Christ himself, calls to us.

He who was dead and is alive. He who reigns. He who is making all things new.

And he will bring us home.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.
