

Prayer: "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, O' Lord."

You know. Until I studied this passage for today I never quite realized how many similarities there are between this passage and the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas. How fitting it is that 2 Chronicles 7:1-3 should be our sermon Scripture for this the first Sunday in Lent. Today is the day we should all celebrate being in the presence of the King. Hear again 2 Chronicles 7:1-3.

### Read 2 Chronicles 7:1-3.

They had waited centuries for what amounts to Christmas. In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve sinned and the relationship between humanity and God was ripped apart. Even though we, humanity caused the harm, God is the one who initiates the reconciliation. God acts first to rebuild the relationship. God called Abram, and through Abram, God created a mighty people. When Abram's descendants were suffering because of a famine in Palestine, Who provided for the children of Israel in Egypt? **(God)** When the children of Israel were enslaved in Egypt Who rescued them with a mighty hand through nine plagues and the parting of the Red Sea? **(God)** Who provided for Israel for 40 years in the wilderness? **(God)** Who provided for Israel for 375 years during the time of the Judges when again and again Israel's children were rebellious against the Lord? **(God)** Again and again the Lord would send a judge to rescue Israel from her enemies. God, through Samuel chose Saul to be Israel's first king. When Saul would not obey God's instructions Who chose the boy, David to be king of Israel? **(God)** When David wanted to build a temple to the Lord, God knew David's heart and David's ambition. God provided an everlasting heir for David's throne and told David Solomon would be the one to build a temple to the Lord. The goal was always the same. Draw the people closer to the Lord so the broken relationship might be restored. The temple was a tool for helping to make that happen. There in 2 Chronicles 7:1-3 we read just how it came to pass that God's presence came to live in the temple Solomon built to the Lord. It was as if God was with the people in the temple of the Lord. At Christmas we call Jesus Christ – Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus is God, only instead of God in the temple Jesus Christ is God in the flesh – both fully God and fully human. Again and again, God initiates a closer relationship with humanity. How does humanity respond?

Too often we respond like children at Christmas. In 2 Chronicles v.3 the people bow down low to the ground to give thanks to God saying, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever." Do y'all understand why it is a big deal for the people? **(pause)** The people are excited because God's presence in the temple means God is still with Israel. God is still for humanity. /even in the midst of all of our sinning, and all of our rebelliousness against God, God still wants us! **(pause)** Sadly, it does not last. Over time the people take God's presence for granted. They forget why having a temple to the Lord was significant. God begins to be treated like just another present under the Christmas tree. Once opened and the wrapping paper is thrown away the people begin to take God for granted. In Israel's case, the people quit visiting the temple. They chased after little "g" gods, and distractions. The temple fell into disrepair. Some of the kings encouraged the people to bring foreign idols to other "g" gods into the Lord's temple. The people took God for granted tried to have their cake and eat it to. God allowed the people to make their choice. They chose to run away from God. God allowed Israel to step away from the Lord's protection. The Babylonians came and lay siege to the city. They took Judah's king and put a puppet king in his place. When Israel's children rebelled again the Babylonian army returned. This time they destroyed the temple Solomon built, knocked down Jerusalem's walls, and burned the walls with fire. Where was the glory of the Lord now? Where were the people singing, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever"? **(pause)** The people were exiled to the furthest corners of the Babylonian empire.

While in exile the people realized what they had done wrong. The Psalmist sings about the people's despair. Only in exile do they recognize their mistake. **(pause)** just like a child they are angry about their punishment.

## Read Psalm 137

After 70 years when the people were allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls with Nehemiah, and to build a new temple with Ezra it was not the same. The temple became more about rules and regulations and cultic sacrifices. The people were trying so hard to please the Lord. They missed something so very important. The deeds and rules and commandments were only ever supposed to do one thing – help us all to say, “No,” to all things which would take us away from the kind of close, deep and abiding relationship we had with God in the Garden of Eden. There in the Garden of Eden the Lord would walk with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8).

As we come to this first Sunday of Lent let me ask, when was the last time you thought about the ways we take God’s presence for granted? Every Sunday we come into this space and want to just go through the motions. We sit and watch the acolytes bring in the flame and light the candles on the altar and the Christ candle, and probably never think about why we do that. Why do we light candles? (pause) Do y’all know why we light candles when we worship the Lord? (pause for responses) We light the candles as a symbol of God’s presence in this place. We light the candles to be reminded of what it was like the day God’s presence came to live in the temple Solomon built to the Lord God Almighty. We light the candles to be reminded that where two or three are gathered in Christ’s name Christ is there also (Matt 18:20).

Yes. We believe God is everywhere. Yes. We believe God is always with us, but the Jews did not know that. They believed God was there in the temple. God was there in the Promised Land, and even still they took God for granted. Outside the temple they behaved one way, and inside the temple they behaved another. This went on until one day they started behaving inside the temple the way they had behaved outside the temple. Have y’all seen church people do that today? Have you seen people swear in church meetings, or polarize the church the same way Democrats and Republicans have polarized our country for their own interests? (pause) Please, do not get me wrong. I am all for honest sinners rather than lying saints. (pause) But the upward call of God through Jesus Christ is about being changed by God inside these walls and then living the changed life outside these walls (Philippians 3:14). There has been far too much of the opposite – bringing our garbage from outside these walls into this space the same way the Jews brought in foreign idols. We are not supposed to allow the outside world to change us. We are supposed to be rebellious. We are supposed to be a force for change in the world. What does being a force for change in the world look like in our church? Do we look more like the world, or do we look more like Christ?

Christians are supposed to be focused and drawn together for a single purpose. We are supposed to be focused on the upward call of God in Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:14). How is it possible to put God first if we take God for granted? When we are more focused on our wants and wishes and becoming like the world we take God for granted. We are taking Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for granted. Jesus paid a terrible price for our choice to take God for granted. Jesus paid a terrible price for our sin. During this season of Lent how will we learn from the Jews’ mistakes when it came to taking God for granted? How will we learn from each other’s mistakes and short falls? We are not called to judge one another. However, we can learn from one another. Lent is the time to ask, “What is helping them grow closer to God?” “What is keeping me from growing closer to God?” “What do I need to change?” “Of what do I need to let go?”

In the name of Jesus Christ,

Amen