

# One Thing For Certain

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



*Ezra 3:10-13; Luke 2:25-27*

Several years ago I had the chance to return with a friend to the town where I grew up on the east side of Detroit. It had been a long time since I had been there and I was excited to see my old haunts and to show a little bit of my childhood to my friend. As we drove into town there was the public library where I would go to check out books pretty much the same. There was the public pool where I spent my summer days. There was the lakeshore where I would hang out with my friends. There was my church where I had been enfolded into the loving family of God. There was the police station where I spent a lot of time pretty much the same. Truthfully, I did spend a lot of time there because as a paper boy for the Detroit Free Press that's where I went to pick up my daily delivery of papers. All that was pretty much the same. And with each of these stops I would pause and tell my friend a story or two of what these places meant to me. And then we drove up the road in order to show my friend my elementary school – Gordon Elementary. We turned the corner only to find that Gordon Elementary was gone. Completely gone. As if it had never been there. Not a trace. It wasn't that it had been remodeled. It wasn't that it had been added to. It wasn't that it had been repurposed. It was that it was gone. Not a trace. No more playground where I hung from the jungle gym. No more baseball field where Danny McIlroy and I got into a fist fight. No more alcove where I stole my first kiss from Cindy Loehr. No more classrooms where I learned to read, write and do arithmetic. Instead, townhouses! On this sacred soil where I learned to spell and fight and play and love and add 2 plus 2. Townhouses! “How can they do this?” I

said to my friend half in jest and half in lament. “How can they take this sacred space away? How dare they? Did they not think to call me? Ask my opinion? Wasn't there ANYWAY to hold onto this hallowed ground?” We paused for a moment as I tried to take it in. And as we paused and stared down one of the streets one of the residents of this new community, a woman, stepped out from her home to start walking her dog. Down the street a father drove into his driveway from work. Across the street two children played in their front yard. Next to them a young woman was raking leaves. And after a few moments my friend said, “I don't know, still looks pretty sacred to me. And I bet it's pretty sacred to them. New buildings, new people, and a new sacred space.”

I hate when my friends are more mature than me.

A new sacredness for a new people.

The truth is I am a pretty sentimental guy. As much as I have tried in my life to push forward to do new things and discover new places and embrace new ministry – there is a part of my that can't help but to look back and hold onto the sacredness of my past. The places where my life was shaped. The experiences that built what little character I possess. The people who invested their lives in me. And these are sacred spaces, sacred moments, sacred people. And there is a part of each of us that wants to protect the sacredness of our past. To not let it go. To place before it a “No Trespassing” sign.

Many of us have decorated our homes for Christmas and I don't know about you but this annual tradition of decorating is a trip into sacredness, isn't it? We pull out of our storage boxes the sacred relics of Christmas. Ornaments our children made. Crèches passed down from the family. Stockings that generations of children have reached into. And we prepare for our Christmas traditions – things we do to call us back to those moments when we encountered the love and presence of God and family. And there is a part of each of us that wants

to protect the sacredness of these traditions. Do Not Disturb, we say.

But things change right? Things change. It is as true a statement as you will ever hear in this world. Things change. Isaiah the prophet would say, Behold, God is doing a new thing. And what God always seems to be doing is creating a new sacredness for a new people. A new sacredness for a new people.

Last Sunday when we were decorating our tree we paused before some of the ornaments we were hanging and remembered them as ornaments from an earlier generation. Mom, dad, grandma, granddad – and the stories we remembered about them are probably different

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than the stories they remembered – and they had been accommodated into our Christmas tradition which was different than theirs. Because things change. God is doing a new thing.

It's hard to imagine the feeling that was felt that day when the people of God gathered on the mount they called Zion to reconstruct the temple. It's just hard to imagine

the feeling. It had been almost four generations since the Babylonians had swept through their neighborhood, their town, their region and carted off most of the people of Israel to take them into exiled captivity in a foreign land. Almost as bad they had laid waste to Jerusalem, their capital city. And perhaps worst of all, maybe worse than their own homes being raised – the Babylonians had leveled the temple. The sacred space. The place where they encountered God. Gathered as a people. Met their neighbors. Offered sacrifices. The temple was their identity. And it was gone. It's hard to imagine the feeling then after close to 80 years of being away from their hometown the people of God are given the chance to return and rebuild. And there the temple lays in ruins.

So they clear the rubble and they lay a new foundation. Begin to create. A new space. And the historian tells us that when they laid the foundation, the new foundation, there was a great shout of joy. God was doing a new thing. God had brought them home. God was giving them a new and sacred space. But then the writer adds, “But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house

on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house ... so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping.”

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change – when God creates a new sacredness for a new people -- some will shout for joy and some will weep for what is no longer. But somewhere in the midst of it all God is doing a new thing.

The first church I served just outside of Philadelphia had its start as a German speaking congregation in North Philadelphia and for its first seventy five years served the German population of that neighborhood until the time came to leave behind their sacred space and move to the growing part of the city. Can you imagine – leave behind the sacred space of four generations? And with it they gave up some of their sacred German traditions to accommodate the English speaking neighborhood into which they had moved...until eventually I arrived and you would have never known it had been a German congregation. I had five wonderful years there and then fifteen years after I left the little church had grown so small that they couldn't pay their bills. They decided to close. They asked me to come and preach and lead their last worship service. And there was weeping. Myself included. But there was shouting for joy for the elders were to hand the keys of the sacred space to a Ghanaian Presbyterian congregation – first and second generation citizens from Ghana in Africa to plant their little church. And who would have believed that within a couple of years it would be filled to the rafters with first and second generation Ghanaian-Americans who worshipped just a little different than us frozen, chosen German/Scots – they shouted for joy. A new sacredness for a new people.

I don't suppose the world was quite ready for the new sacredness that Mary carried inside of her. The priests and Pharisees had their sacred temple. The great King Herod had his sacred palace. Even little Bethlehem had its own sacred little neighborhoods. The world had its own pace and tradition. So it was difficult for anyone to find any real room for this new sacredness, this baby that Mary was soon to deliver. The priests and Pharisees didn't

have any room. King Herod most certainly didn't have any room. Even the house and lineage of David didn't have any room. Luke tells us that there wasn't even room in the inn. So Mary and Joseph were left to lay the new sacredness in a manger. The new sacred space. Huddled in the corner where the animals fed. Who would have picked a cattle trough for the new sacred space? But God is doing a new thing, right?

Ironic isn't it that it's an old man – old man Simeon who has spent most of his time in that old sacred temple that when they bring into the temple the baby Jesus – the new sacredness – it's the old man who reaches out and take him into his arms. And with his embrace he says, "God is doing a new thing and many will fall and rise as a result of it." In other words, things are going to change and not everybody is going to like it.

So doesn't the old soul Simeon have something to teach us? Lord knows, he had no idea that that grand temple in which he stood to embrace this new sacredness – this mammoth temple would seventy five years later be turned, like the ones before, into rubble. No one could have imagined that. But down it would come. But Simeon had eyes long past the temple to see the new sacredness. He had eyes to see the coming of the Lord. He had eyes to see the salvation of God.

Is there a more certain thing that will happen in your life and in mine than the reality of change? And sometimes the change will be slow and gradual. Sometimes the change will be fast and abrupt. Sometimes the change will be welcomed and sometimes the change will be unwanted. Most of the time the change will be nothing we can control. A transfer to a new town. A diagnosis from the doctor. An ending of a marriage. Unexpected news from a child. New society norms. Technology we can't seem to catch up to. A church doing new and different things. Nothing stays the same. And with those things will come the weeping of loss. As well there should. The old

temple is no longer. Things are not the way they used to be. That which was once sacred to us has been passed as a new sacredness to others.

Sometimes even life itself. I remember an early morning years ago when I got a call from a family – the beloved patriarch of the clan had had a heart attack and could I come quick to the hospital? And so I did. And at bedside with several of the family we waited together to see if his old body was strong enough to hold on. And as it turned out it wasn't. He passed. And we wept and we prayed and we held onto each other. After a while I left them to themselves and made my way to the elevator. The son of the deceased caught up to me in the hall to thank me for coming. We talked as he walked me to the elevator. When we got to the elevator the door opened and there on the elevator was a young man standing behind a wheelchair. And in the wheelchair was a young woman – a young mother – holding her newborn child. And the grieving son turned to me with tears still in his eyes, and said, "Behold, he does a new thing."

And that's why we are the Advent people right? Because we know God is doing a new thing. For we get to be the ones in the crowd who know that someday the weeping turns into dancing. Tears turn into triumph. For though the temple shall fall, though the playground and classroom shall disappear, though the old ways are going away, though the change of life is for certain, there is one thing ever more for certain. God is doing a new thing. God is doing a new thing. And to know this and believe this – we open our eyes to see the coming salvation. We open our hearts to behold the baby born in unexpected places and we open our arms to embrace the new sacredness.



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Church of the Palms

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