As a little kid growing up, some of my favorite songs to sing were tunes I learned at Vacation Bible School and church camp. Some of the ones I still remember because of their catchy melody, even though their theology now seems way off base. And then there are other songs that still teach me something profound about God and faith...songs I'll likely sing to my children someday.

One song I still know all the words to is called “The Church Song.” It’s a song about what the church is, and what it is not. The lyrics emphasize the church not as a building or a business or a corporation, but as the people of God, the body of Christ, living lives of faith. The chorus goes like this:

We are the church  
The body of our Lord  
We are all God’s children  
And we have been restored

The message of “The Church Song” is great. The church is not bricks and mortar...it is not a place or an institution...it is the people, God’s people, living the faithful way of their Savior.

It could be a perfect song of the day to drive home the point of the passage we just read from Revelation.

In Revelation, John is trying to open up people’s imaginations about what the church is, and where the kingdom of God is located, and how this holy city, this new Jerusalem is going to look when all is said and done.

John’s vision of this new heaven and new earth is radical, and very different from what his readers might imagine...
“I saw no temple in the city,” John says, “for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb...It’s gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there.”

John’s words in Revelation were written long before vacation bible school songs that warmed us to the idea of the church as people, living and working together. For this community of long ago, it was almost impossible to fathom a city of God without a temple, or gates, or fancy lights.

It had to be a little bit like trying to imagine your favorite city without its iconic buildings...Chicago without the Sears Tower, New York without the Empire State Building, Sioux Falls without the Cathedral. These important places say something about what a city is. It identifies place and sets it apart.

So to suggest that the new Jerusalem will have no temple is almost inconceivable. Can it really be a new Jerusalem without a temple? Isn’t the temple precisely what makes it a city of God?

Today, of course, John’s vision in Revelation is not nearly as shocking. After all, we know that cities are defined by much more than their buildings. We learned that back in 2001, when a couple of prominent towers fell and changed the New York skyline forever. The city became identified less by its architecture, and more by the resilience of its people.

Besides terrorist attacks, the turn of the millennium brought many more things that moved our focus away from physical spaces. Virtual venues became more convenient and conducive to creating community. Increasingly, there just simply isn’t the need for buildings like temples.
Nor is there really the interest. Institutional religion in the 21st century appears to be headed out the window. The big chatter among pastors and church historians and sociologists is the rise of a group known as “nones,” n-o-n-e-s...people who don’t identify with any religious tradition. They’re not atheists, they’re just sort of indifferent. Whether there is or isn’t a temple in the city of God, they don’t really care. And even if the temple is there, religious nones are unlikely to ever darken its door.

These are the same folks who grew up singing “We are the Church” in their Vacation Bible School classes. Vacation Bible School classes that they’ve now outgrown, and that they won’t be taking their children to because they just don’t seem all that relevant.

We live in an era that has groomed us for a city without a temple. We are the church. We, the people. We are what matter. We are what make a place holy. We are the movement that will usher in the kingdom of God.

There’s a lot that is faithful about a perspective like this. It recognizes God working through God’s people. It lifts us the value of humanity, and opens our eyes to incarnation happening again and again, not just in the flesh and bone of Jesus but in us too, the body of Christ.

But I wonder if we've gotten too used to a city without a temple. If we've gotten too used to a faith without a centering place...without a concrete something to guide us.

John was right to imagine a new Jerusalem with no temple. In that time and in that place, a vision of a city with no temple needed to be shared. The temple had become so important that it was too important to Christians who couldn’t imagine faithfulness to God without it. John knew there would come a day when the temple wouldn’t be there anymore, and he needed to get the message across that it was possible for God to usher in God’s kingdom even without sacred buildings.
Today is a different time and place, though, and like the Sunday School songs we sang as children, these words that we hear in Revelation are very familiar. It’s a given for us that the new Jerusalem won’t be centered around a fancy religious building. Hardly any parts of our lives are centered around physical places anymore. We’ve learned that you can do faith just about anywhere...at home, at a concert, at the mall, in the woods, even on Facebook, and over text message.

But I worry that we’ve gotten so used to the notion of faith without institution, and spirituality without religion that the pendulum is starting to swing from one extreme to the other.

We’ve moved away from worshipping the temple, and we’ve embraced a vision of God’s kingdom coming among us and through us...which isn’t an altogether bad thing...until we start to believe that the kingdom of God that is coming IS us.

Don’t get me wrong...I think there is a lot about buildings and temples and the church as institution that is problematic. There are too many rules, too many closed doors and locked gates, not enough hospitality, too much judgment, too much guilt, too much hypocrisy. And it’s a good thing to move away from all that. Churches are often not relevant places or compassionate places.

But as I hear my peers and myself talk about faith, as I hear many of you and your peers talk about faith, we say a lot about deconstructing temples and moving away from the problems of institutional church, but we don’t have as much to say about what we’re moving toward as an alternative to a temple-centered life.

The Church Song that I sang as a child said a lot about what the church is not...the church is not a building, it’s not a corporation, it’s not a business...but the song did a vague job at best about naming what the church actually IS.
“We are the church,” the refrain of the song repeats again and again. But what does that even mean? More and more it feels like individualism without structure, and relativism without accountability. I am able to worship God in ways that feel best to me, without being constricted by a building or a community.

We begin to think that humanity, that we, are the center of God’s new kingdom coming. Sometimes we think that there is no center at all. That it’s all up for grabs. That the church as we know it can disappear, and that God’s kingdom will still come.

One of the things I am so grateful for in Revelation is what it says about the center of God’s kingdom. First of all, it is clear that there is a center. There must be a center. Even without a temple, life can’t be lived with everything up for grabs or up to us. We need something to focus us.

The text is also clear about what the center is and what it is not. The city of God is built among us, but not around us. We are not the center. In the middle of this new Jerusalem is a river, John says, and trees and fruit…and in the center of everything is God and God’s throne. Not a building. Not people. Just God and a crystal clear river, and some lovely fruit-bearing trees.

In some ways our 21st century interpretations of biblical texts like Revelation ought to shock us as much as the plain words on the page shocked readers back in John’s day. What does it mean that we’re no longer phased by a vision of a city of God with no temple? What does say about us that we assume that a move away from organized religion means a move toward our own individual preferences and persuasions? Why is it that we assume that if the temple is not the church, the default option is that WE are the church?

At the end of the day, at the end of all days, God’s new city will be full of things beyond our wildest imaginations. For early Christians, it was difficult to fathom church without a temple. For Christians today, it is difficult to fathom church without us. And yet Christ’s kingdom will come...with or without a temple, with or without us.
Exercise your imagination about the church. What might it look like? What about it might shock you? What about it might be different than the songs you sang in Sunday School? What about it might be better or truer?

Is it possible that we might be further from the center of God’s city than we imagined ourselves to be? Is it possible that trees and rivers and other parts of creation might be more in the middle of things than we are? And is it possible that the center of God’s new city might call us to greater structure and institution than we’re used to in our world today?

Bring your holy city to our earth, O God. Surprise us with a new vision of church. As our pendulums of faith and understanding swing this way and that, draw us back to your radical middle...that all of creation might find its center finally in you.

Amen.
Holy Communion
Wednesday, May 8, 2013

Prelude  “Sonata in E♭ - I Allegro”  J.S. Bach
Welcome/Announcements
Call to Worship
L: This is the day our God is making
C: Let us rejoice.
L: This is the time when God is present.
C: Let us be open.
L: This is the moment when forgiveness flows and life is renewed.
C: Let us sing.

Hymn  “Come, We That Love the Lord”  ELW #625 vv. 1&3
Scripture  Revelation 21: 10, 22 – 22:5
Sermon  Pastor Ann

Hymn  “Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation”  ELW #645 vv. 1,2, & 4
Holy Communion
Dialogue
Words of Institution
Lord’s Prayer
Distribution  “Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen”  Johannes Brahms
Sung in German from Ein Deutches Requiem
How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord.
My heart and soul sing for joy to the living God.
Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.
-Psalm 84:1,2,4
Members of Angelus, The Collegiate Chorale, and The Augustana Choir
Deanna Wehrspann, Piano

Blessing
Benediction
Postlude  “Sonata in Eb - III Allegro”  J.S. Bach
Dismissal

The Common Ground/Outreach Bonanza will be held out on the Green on Friday, May 10th from 6:00pm to Saturday, May 11th in the morning, to celebrate a great year of fellowship and get excited for next year; ALL are welcome! Friday evening we will be playing games, singing songs, enjoying a bonfire, eating snacks and star gazing. Big group events will end that evening but the option is available for people to spend the night on the Green; Augie Outdoor Club will be providing some camping materials (sleeping bags, etc.) but consider bringing your own sleeping bags/blankets/etc

Taize at Pine Ridge, May 24-27. Any students interested in going to the Taize International meeting at Pine Ridge in May are encouraged to meet with Pr. Paul. We want to spread the word widely about this rare and exciting weekend of solidarity with our Native neighbors! Sign up sheet is on the Narthex table. Students interested in attending the May 24-27 Taize weekend at Red Shirt Table please sign up in the narthex, or speak to Pr. Paul.

Want to learn more about Taize??? Come to the chapel for conversation and worship on Wednesday, May 8, 7-9pm. Brother John and a team of friends from Taize, France will be present as we learn about what Taize is and the impact this movement is having on young adults around the world. All are welcome.

Bread for the World's National Gathering will be held June 8-11, 2013, in Washington DC. In addition to inspiring workshops and advocacy training, there is an opportunity to meet with our South Dakota congressional delegation to personally discuss hunger issues locally and globally. BFW-SD would cover transportation, registration fees, and lodging. If you are interested or know of someone who is interested, please contact Nancy Olson, 605-332-4350, s10andyw@sio.midco.net for further information and to request an application before April 15, 2013. You can also find information about the event at www.bread.org

CHAPEL SCHEDULE

Fri., May 10th  Morning Worship, 10 am - Katie Hjerpe, Sr. Spkr.
Sun., May 12th  Morning Worship, 11 am - Pr. Paul
Mon, May 13th  Morning worship, 10 am - Patrick Hicks, Eng.
Tues., May 14th  Koinonia, 10 am
Wed., May 15th  Holy Communion, 10 am - Peg Preston; Collegiate Chor.
Fri., May 17th  Morning Worship, 10 am - Camp Counselor Commissioning
Sun., May 19th  Morning Worship, 11 am - Megan Kremin, Sr. Spkr.

The chapel is available for prayer and meditation during finals

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

South Dakota Synod Assembly, ELCA will be June 7-8 at Our Savior’s. Our student congregation may send one male and one female delegate. Please see Pr. Paul or Pr. Ann if you are interested. Preference is given to students from South Dakota.
Holy Communion
Wednesday, May 8, 2013

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Call to Worship
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C: Let us rejoice.
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Words of Institution
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Sung in German from Ein Deutches Requiem

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Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.
-Psalm 84:1,2,4

Members of Angelus, The Collegiate Chorale, and The Augustana Choir
Deanna Wehrspann, Piano

Blessing
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