

Second Sunday of Christmas
Jess Lee

The sparrow has found her a house
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young;
by the side of your altars, O Lord of hosts,
my King and my God.

I spent a summer a few years ago working in a lab that studied the flight evolution and biomechanics of birds. While my project was based mainly in working with data we had previously collected, my lab mate and close friend was studying blue bird flight.

We would get up before dawn most mornings and check the nest boxes scattered around the environmental center where we were working. We had been watching the nests all summer and had diagramed which nest boxes blue birds had moved into, which ones barn swallows had nested in, and which ones were still empty. We would count the eggs, watch the eggs hatch, and get to know these birds.

And some mornings, we would check a nest that we had been watching, one whose eggs were just ready to hatch, and it would be completely destroyed. The mating pair was gone, sometimes pieces of broken eggs remained, and the eggs would never hatch.

Most of what caused this was house sparrows. House sparrows are these tiny little brown birds, native to Europe, who were brought over in the 1850s to the United States. Since they were introduced so recently, they are considered invasive and really don't have any natural predators. And, these sparrows destroy nests made by blue birds and barn swallows.

When the psalmist writes, *the sparrow has found her a house and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young*, I know that they are not talking about the dynamics to the relationships between house sparrows and barn swallows in the fields of Ohio, but I like to imagine that they are. I like to think that at the altar of the Lord, the swallows and the sparrows are both nesting together. I like to imagine this Psalm as an almost sneaky version of the writings of Isaiah of how the wolf shall dwell with the lamb.

We normally get that passage from Isaiah, of the wolf dwelling with the lamb, in Advent and Christmastime.

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child will lead them.

We often read this passage as prophecy about Jesus and the type of world that God is making and revealing. We see Jesus as the little child, leading these animals that normally kill each other, not to death, but to life.

The altar of the Lord of hosts, is one where the sparrow who has destroyed so many of the swallows' and blue birds' nests can find a house. The altar of the Lord of hosts is one where the swallow, who has had so many of her nests destroyed by the sparrow, can lay her young. This altar is one where all may raise their young, where all may rest, where all may rejoice in the flesh of the living God.

And sometimes, I like to think of this altar as a literal altar, the altar in our church, the altar found in so many churches. I like to imagine the swallows and the sparrows and all of us nestled around this altar, resting and raising young. I can see the little sparrow no longer destroying the swallow's nests, but rather making their own nest right next to the tabernacle.

And other times, I am reminded that there are temples and altars beyond the ones that we build. There are the ones beyond buildings, the ones that we have tried to worship in while most of us cannot be near the altar in the church building. Maybe the altar that the sparrows and swallows are nesting near is not an altar in a building, but the altar of the world itself.

And all of these altars, all of these temples, are for God and made by God. Eastern Orthodox Priest Kaleeg Hainsworth writes on these temples, "One fact is so obvious that it seems unnecessary to say it: the materials we use to build our temples are drawn directly from the temples built by God. Our stone is quarried from His mountains, our wood from His forests, our glass from His sand, our bricks from His clay, and our jewels from His earth."

Even the altars that we do craft, that we do set apart, are not ours. And even though all of our altars and temples and the world are ultimately made by God, specific places do matter.

In the passage from Luke today, we see young Jesus in the temple, in his Father's house.

This passage from Luke is sort of out of place with the narrative that we have been following. For those of you who follow the feasts and fasts of the church, Friday was the Feast of the Holy Name, the day celebrating Jesus's circumcision and the giving of his name at the temple 8 days after his birth. And on Tuesday we will celebrate the Epiphany, the coming of the wise men to the Christ child. And in about a month, we will read the passage in Luke directly before the one we read today to honor the presentation of Jesus at the temple and we will read the passage in Luke that gives us the Song of Simeon.

So this passage of the not infant yet child Jesus gets lost at the temple chronologically should come after the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord in early February. And yet, it is appointed as one of the Gospels allowed for this Sunday.

All of this so say, the church calendar makes very little chronological sense, especially when superimposed onto our secular calendar. And that is very much an okay thing.

Whenever I think of the weirdness of the liturgical calendar, I am reminded of the calendar that Maria Montessori developed to teach children the seasons of the church.

She designed a wooden, circular calendar, with colors corresponding for each of the liturgical seasons. And this makes some intuitive sense, yet she flips the calendar. Rather than having the seasons flow in a clockwise manner as expected, they are counter clockwise.

We cannot by any means honor and celebrate the 33 year long life of Jesus in one year, and the thousand year history in the Hebrew Scriptures and the hundreds of years covered in the Epistles and always have it make sense. And Montessori nods to that by flipping the liturgical calendar. As much as we want the narrative and time to make sense with the Bible and with Jesus, it simply at

times does not. God's time is very much not human time, and our story with God does not map simply over the course of a single year.

Anyway, so we meet the young Jesus, in the temple, lost to his parents in this time that doesn't quite make sense to us on the Second Sunday of Christmas.

And he is sitting among the teachers, asking questions and listening. And Mary, once she finds him, treasures all of these things in her heart.

And I want to pause at this treasuring all of these things in her heart because we said it a few days ago on Christmas Eve. A few verses earlier, which we read on Christmas Eve, the shepherds have come to worship the newborn Jesus, and Mary we are told, treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

In both of these places, someone is seeking, Christ is found, and Mary then ponders and treasures in her heart. The shepherds are seeking the child, and they do find him. And again, Mary herself is seeking for Jesus, is seeking for her son, and does find him.

And I think it is tempting to want to contrast the manger where the shepherds find Jesus with the temple where Mary finds him. With the altar in our churches to the altar of the world. These are two very different places; there are very much major differences between mangers and temples.

I do not want to claim that holy places that have been set aside and consecrated are not in fact set aside and consecrated, but I do want to remind us that Christ is not only revealed in places that have been set aside and consecrated.

We see in these two stories, these two searches, that Christ is revealed, known, and found in *both* the temple and the manger. The revealing of Christ is not bound by time and places. As Montessori's calendar expresses so well, God is not bound by our linear time

God is not only revealing Godself in the temple, but throughout all of the earth. God is not only revealing Godself at that morning in the temple, but throughout all time. God reveals Godself as much on this Second Sunday of Christmas as God did when God was missing from his parents, talking with the teachers in the temple. And that is strange.

And, because of this strangeness, this constant inverting by God, this constant meshing of two things that should be incompatible, the constant call of God to have swallows and sparrows dwell next to each other, to make a world where the little child leads the wolf and the lamb, we, like Mary, have to ponder these things in our hearts.

And to return to Father Kaleeg: *I believe the human heart is the altar of God, and that the temple is incomplete until we bring this altar to it.*

And so we see Mary bringing these things to her human heart, to the altar of God as she ponders and treasures these things in her heart.

And we too, bring these things, and so much more, to our own human hearts, to our own altars of God, and we treasure and ponder these things.