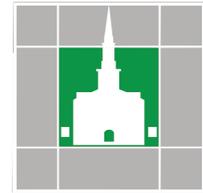


# Extravagant Mercy

Scripture text: Joel 2:12-13, 28-29

The Rev. Matthew McCaffrey

Center Church on the Green, December 6, 2020



I was a young teenager at the time that my hometown of Burlington, Vermont, experienced two catastrophic events in the space of 15 months.

The first happened on a chilly February day in 1971. On Saint Paul Street in the downtown district, three massive churches each occupied a block: the First Baptist Church, the Episcopal Cathedral of Saint Paul for which the street was named, and the enormous Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception at the head of the street.

A young television reporter was interviewing a businessman a block away when he saw the man's face suddenly contort in alarm. When he turned to see why, he saw thick clouds of smoke billowing from the basement of St. Paul's. An electrical problem had sparked a blaze that quickly gutted the building. By nightfall the clock tower still stood, but the building was essentially destroyed.

The following May, in the latter part of a beautiful spring evening, alarms were dialed in to the Fire Department as the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception erupted in flames. Seeing

the inferno at the firehouse three blocks away, the chief quickly called in mutual aid from the surrounding communities without waiting for engines to arrive at the scene. A young man on the scene confessed that he had set the fire along with seven others in the downtown area, and was eventually confined to the state hospital. The local newspaper account noted that the last standing church on “Church Row”—the Baptist church—tolled its bell through the early morning hours as the fire raged.

Both cathedrals were rebuilt with an awareness of the times and of their changed surroundings. Saint Paul’s swapped land with the city to relocate two blocks away. Their modern building of cast concrete was received at first with skepticism, but they persevered and built a modern low-income senior housing complex on their campus. The congregation remains vital and engaged in the community today.

The diocese rebuilt Immaculate Conception on the same site as the 1850s-era granite building. It is a beautiful, low, modern building surrounded by trees that provide a buffer between the city streets and the contemplative space.

But Immaculate Conception is one of two cathedral parishes in the small city of Burlington. Or, perhaps I should say “was.” In 2018 the downtown cathedral merged with the St. Joseph’s

cathedral 4 blocks away, and later in the year closed its doors. The building is now deconsecrated as a church and is being offered for sale.

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That may seem sad. And that would not be a surprise because for many of us the idea of “church” is organized around the buildings that house our congregations. In our time when I say “church” you are more likely to have a picture of a building in your mind.

It’s not surprising because we are “wired” to associate groups with places. We associate events in our lives with the places where they happened. Most of you know where you were born, where you were baptized, the place where you met someone special in your life. You know where you were when a significant event happened—the death of a loved one, a marriage, a birth. For us, many of those events are associated with church buildings.

And in this grim year we have found ourselves separated from the places we love. The feeling of arrival, of recognition...the memories of past milestones and ceremonies and festivals that wash over us every time we walk into a church Sanctuary...the act of being present has been taken away from us. We are separated for

very good reasons, and maybe we feel like we're separated from our memories as well.

That feeling that our memories actually live somewhere else, and that we want to be there instead of in our homes listening on a telephone line or watching a screen, is understandable. It may be our desire to get back to real worship in our real church sanctuary. But the fact that we can't keeps butting into our consciousness. And the question of when we might be able to return causes real harm.

So we are left to fantasize about those good old days when we could enter that building any time we wanted, and why didn't we do it more often?

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With that reality before us we just may be open to hearing a word from a long-ago voice speaking to a group of disoriented people.

Joel is a prophet who brings a message to a new generation. Their parents and grandparents had been carried away to Babylon. The grandparents had beautiful memories of the Temple at Jerusalem, where all the rituals and festivals of life had been celebrated. Ah, the Temple! With its Portico, its Outer court and Inner Court, and the central room, the Holy of Holies where the

priests offered up sacrifices day and night to God. The Temple was where a child received her name, where the collective memories of the people were celebrated and their losses were mourned, where deepest longings and needs were brought to God's attention.

That's what the grandparents remembered. That's what they told the parents, and in their turn what the parents told the children. The grandparents passed away, the parents aged, and the children believed that returning to Jerusalem meant they would be able to take part in real worship at last.

It was...nothing like that. The Temple had been torn down and the enormous stone blocks scattered. Jerusalem looked nothing like the royal city it had been before the exile. The returnees were plunked down in an alien landscape, and were thoroughly disoriented. What now? Where is God in all this?

And so Joel introduces an idea that had been submerged under beautiful buildings and illusions of strength. God was right there, and God was ready to fortify the arms and the resolve of the returnees. God did not need or want the returnees to rebuild a Temple in order to be in relationship again. God simply wanted a genuine relationship—a recognition that God was not a building, but a being.

God was not looking for liturgical robes and copious sacrifices. God was not looking for a Holy of Holies or anyplace else as a dwelling. God was looking to pour the Spirit out on people, not on places.

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In an Advent season like no other we can recall, we may need to hear that. In an Advent season like no other, are we open to an extravagant offer from God?

In our preparation seasons of years past, we have spent much time discussing how to decorate a Sanctuary: what we will use, how we might innovate, who is designated to put up the decorations. In this Advent season like no other, we are not going to be decorating a Sanctuary.

In our preparation seasons of years past, we have had a kind of bifurcated relationship with Advent. Out in the world there were concerts and parties and tree-lightings and Santa parades all calling to us. In this Advent season like no other most of those events are either curtailed or completely shut down; the words and stories of our own tradition are calling us without competition.

In our preparation seasons of years past, we may have felt an occasional desire to pay attention to what it means for God to become one of us, but found ourselves setting it aside and putting

it off until Christmas Eve because we couldn't allow ourselves to stop for even a minute to feel something. In this Advent season like no other, we do not have to wait to allow God's extravagant mercy flood into our lives.

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Whether or not we were aware of it, God's extravagant mercy has brought us safely to this day. It didn't take a church building or a particular set of circumstances. It just is.

God's Spirit is ready to carry us beyond this day. God's Spirit waits for us to give it voice and dream, and vision and power.

On this day of expectancy, let's open ourselves to that Spirit's arrival among us. Let's not wait another day for the love that God is patiently waiting to lavish on us. Amen.