# Where is the Temple?

# Ephesians 2:11-22

# A sermon preached at Baldwin Auditorium on July 19, 2015 by the Rev. Dr. Carol Gregg

Take that Diana!

That’s what John Wesley said in concluding his comments on the Ephesians passage which we have heard this morning. Take that Diana! It doesn’t sound like the 18th century preacher, John Wesley? Really? Well, maybe I paraphrased just a bit.

Diana is the goddess of the hunt in Roman mythology and her counterpart in Greek mythology was Artemis. Wesley mentions this goddess because there was a temple dedicated to her in Ephesus. A big temple.

The temple of Artemis at Ephesus, as it is most commonly known, was one of the largest Greek temples ever built, the first to be made entirely of marble, and had a total of 127 columns, each of which was 60 feet high. It was 377 feet in length and 180 feet wide.[[1]](#footnote-1) Compare this to Duke Chapel. The interior of the Chapel is 291 feet long and 63 feet wide.[[2]](#footnote-2) So, it was 1/3 longer and 3 times wider than our beloved chapel, which is quite spacious. It was also bigger and older than the more famous Parthenon in Athens, which it also predates. The temple of Artemis took 120 years to build, with construction starting around 560 BCE. It was destroyed 200 years later by an arsonist who hoped to immortalize his name by setting fire to the wooden frame of the roof. The Ephesians decreed that his name would not be recorded, thus hoping to thwart his selfish goal, but a decree could not silence everyone. Google will tell you his name; but I won’t. Reconstruction of the temple began not long after the fire and once completed the temple stood until its destruction by invading Goths in 262 CE.[[3]](#footnote-3) It was named as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, certainly for its size, but also for the magnificent art which decorated it. [[4]](#footnote-4)

While the Temple of Artemis was clearly a physical presence in Ephesus, it was more than that. Much more. Festivals celebrated the goddess. Citizens worshipped her. News of her spread. One of the rituals to honor Artemis was a parade of statues. Thirty-one statues made of precious metals were removed from the temple, carried by the temple priests around the city, then brought back to the temple.[[5]](#footnote-5) Surely that was a sight designed to impress all those who saw it. There is some discussion that the understanding of the goddess Artemis developed over time incorporating the views of Asia was well as that of Greece and Rome. If so, then in addition to representing the goddess of the hunt, wilderness, childbirth and virginity, she was also the goddess of the moon, nature, and fertility.[[6]](#footnote-6) She became an all-purpose divinity. No wonder she was popular.

Beyond being the center of religious devotion, the temple was a major player in banking and finance, as money was deposited and borrowed and businesses blossomed around the temple. One author claims that “through economic means the religion of Artemis became an indispensable pillar” in the culture.[[7]](#footnote-7) Another scholar sees the influence of Artemis by noting that whenever Ephesus is mentioned in ancient literature, Artemis is often mentioned as well.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is as if the two go hand in hand.

The temple of Artemis was massive, both in its physical presence and in its influence. It was present in Ephesus when Paul went there to preach, a fact which is also recorded in the book of Acts. And it stood when the letter to Ephesians was written.

In Acts 19, we can sense the devotion of the temple worshippers as well as the persistence of the Apostle Paul. In Acts we read, Paul “entered the synagogue [in Ephesus] and for three months spoke out boldly, and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. When some stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of the Way before the congregation, he left them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.” (Acts 19:8-10) From the distance of 2,000 years, I wonder if we sometimes imagine Paul strolling into town, speaking glowingly about Jesus, while folks immediately nodded in grateful assent. That’s not what Acts reports. For three months, Paul spoke *boldly* and *argued* in the synagogue. Then he moved to the lecture hall and continued arguing daily for two years. He argued for two years. That’s a long time. Clearly the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, had a world view and religion that they did not want to change.

Later, in the same chapter in Acts, we see the story of a riot – a riot which demonstrates the financial influence of the temple. A craftsman who made silver shrine of Artemis gathered his peers to complain about Paul’s work. He worried about their income as Paul’s message drew people away from the temple of Artemis. This stirring of fear and discontent lead to a riot in which the citizens of Ephesus shouted for two hours in unison “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” (Acts 19:34) What devotion to spend two hours shouting! There was passion for Artemis and commitment to the temple and all its influence.

There is, of course, another temple in the minds of some and that was the temple of Jerusalem. We are, perhaps, more familiar with the history and role of this temple. One scholar succinctly writes, “The temple in Jerusalem was not only the religious heart of the nation, and the place of pilgrimage of Jews throughout the world. It was also the political, social, musical and cultural heart of Jerusalem – as well as the place of celebration and feasting.”[[9]](#footnote-9) For those in the synagogue in Ephesus, it was the Jerusalem temple that was ever-present in their minds.

I wonder, if when we read this letter, if there is a temple, particularly a pagan temple, that dominates our culture, our lives. Is there an institution that has a massive presence in our world? Or many several? What has power and influence, such that it is a controlling force in our world? What systems of beliefs or convictions have developed industries around them such that we can’t imagine dismantling them? I expect that we have one or more temples in our midst.

As we read the letter to the Ephesians, we can imagine the massive influence of the temple, the Temple of Artemis for some, the temple of Jerusalem for others, in the lives of the original hearers.

The letter to the Ephesians begins with a lyrical description of all the blessings known to us in Christ. We are blessed with “every spiritual blessing”, have the “riches of God’s grace,” and are adopted s God’s own (Eph 1:3, 8, 5) The language is beautiful, poetic, and compelling. The letter goes on to point out the real differences between death and life claiming, “you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air” (Eph 2:1) and that some continue this path refusing God’s grace. And in today’s reading the author declares that the issues which so powerfully divided the community of faith are now gone and the people are one. Circumcision was the divisive issue of the day, as some had it and others didn’t. The author declares that this powerful, historical, contentious issue is past. Christ “has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” (Eph 2:14) The new reality is that the long-standing issue that had divided two groups was now gone.

In typical conflict resolution scenarios, whether those involved are nations or family members, the two opposing parties are to encouraged to engage in dialogue and seek to understand each other’s position. Then, each side is supposed to give a little to get a little. Comprise is the means to reducing conflict. It is often a long, difficult, and imperfect process. Peaceful coexistence is a satisfactory result while true unity is an ideal outcome.

What is happening in this letter is different than conflict resolution. Jesus did not encourage negotiation, instead by the action of Christ, divisions are eliminated as both groups are equally reconciled to God. It is hard for me to imagine that the Jews and Gentiles immediately experienced and accepted this new reality, and yet real it was. Despite the fact that they may have had tension between them, the letter declares, in no uncertain terms, that there was a deeper reality, a true reality, in which they were already profoundly unified. Perhaps we, in the family of faith, could took a lesson from this. When we seek to address differences between us, maybe what we are really doing is uncovering the unity that Christ has already provided. Rather than thinking about dialogue and compromise, perhaps we should think of decluttering of histories, emotions, and patterns to find the union that is already accomplished by Christ, for Christ is our peace.

As an aside, note that three times the author asserts that Christ is our peace. The *Pax Romana* was not the source of peace. The Ephesians were living under the peace of Rome, one which provided stability, and yet was won and maintained through force. It is possible that the Ephesians heard this letter as a challenge to the culture and emperor by declaring that it was Christ not Augustus who brought peace.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Today’s section of Ephesians ends with the beautiful affirmation that these two, diverse yet united groups, the Jews and the Gentiles, together are members of the household of God, built on the foundation of apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone. Yet more than that, these people, together are a holy temple, a dwelling place for God. (Eph 2:20-21) This group of people is where God choses to reside.

I am imaging that in the shadow of the impressive, beautiful Temple of Artemis, a group of people hear the letter of Ephesians. This group, perhaps small by comparison to the dominant culture, certainly divided by background and conviction, with a history of mutual animosity, this group of Ephesians is affirmed as the true temple where God resides. It is the reconciled people of God, wherever and whenever they meet, that have become God’s home.

This means that historic temples that once set the rules, like the Jerusalem Temple, are no longer central and the pagan temples such as the Temple of Artemsis are as empty as they have always been. We need not give in to massive, cultural influences and we are freed to follow the way of Christ.

And if the followers of Jesus are indeed the temple of God, then we need each other. We need to meet regularly to be a people, rather than as scattered individuals. It makes a difference when we show up for worship, education, fellowship and mission, because it is when we are together, that we are “built … into a dwelling place for God.” (Eph 2:22) Some show up by way of technology and our media ministry, some are here in person. Some are in churches down the street; some are in worship centers in distant lands. When I say “we”, I am not thinking of “we” with closed doors, but rather with open doors. All who come are welcome. No matter how or where we gather as Christians, we need to remember that in Christ we are already one, already unified, already at peace. Our work is to live in to the reality that Christ has accomplished for us.

As the people of God, we have a blessed privilege and holy responsibility, to be the place where God choses to dwell.

John Wesley wrote, “What is the temple of Diana of the Ephesians, whom ye formerly worshipped, to this?”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Indeed, what are these earthly structures compared to the blessings we have in Christ?

Christ has reconciled us. God choses to dwell among us. Here. Now.

Take that, Diana – Artemis. You have nothing on us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. University of Chicago <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/greece/paganism/artemis.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Duke Chapel Brochure <https://chapel.duke.edu/sites/default/files/FinalBrochure2014.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. University of Chicago <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/greece/paganism/artemis.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Britannica <http://www.britannica.com/topic/Temple-of-Artemis-temple-Ephesus-Turkey> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Wabash College <http://persweb.wabash.edu/facstaff/royaltyr/AncientCities/web/gierc/project1/Artemis.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Ancient Art and Artemsis” Andrew Hill p. 91 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ephesians, Power and Magic* by Clinton Arnold, p. 21 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Harvard Theological Review <http://www.academia.edu/2403371/_The_Beasts_at_Ephesus_and_the_Cult_of_Artemis_Harvard_Theological_Review_106_2013_459-477> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters,* N.T. Wright, p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “Hearing the Politics of Peace in Ephesians”, Gosnell L. Yorke, p. 120 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Wesley's Notes on the Bible, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes.i.xi.iii.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)