

# Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

*'At that time, the Feast of Dedication took place.'*

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In 1896, a certain rabbi visited a friend of his who worked as a playwright. It was supposed to be a very enjoyable social visit, where they would talk of many things and eat good food. All was well when the rabbi arrived, yet it would not remain that way.

Upon being seated at his friend's house, the rabbi looked over into the playwright's living room to see his friend's children playing on the floor. Terror struck. For near where they were playing was a most dastardly thing from the perspective of the rabbi. They were playing next to a Christmas tree.

Horrified by the vision of good Jewish children frolicking around a, what was at the time in America, a newly introduced Lutheran symbol of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the rabbi scolded his friend at length, and after a rather unenjoyable evening of argument, the rabbi left with a new fear: that Jews would celebrate Christmas.

He was not alone. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this rabbi, as well as a few contemporary Jewish notables were frightened that their children would give up their Jewish heritage in favor of all the glitz, glamor, gift-giving, and fun of the Christmas season, so widely celebrated in the New World.

They determined that there could be only one solution: there needs to be a Jewish alternative to Christmas.

Looking through the dates of historical Jewish celebrations, they came across a holiday, barely celebrated since 70 AD, which happened to fall during the time of Christmas. It was unknown to most Jews, but since it overlapped with the

Christian holy day, it was a perfect candidate for an alternative. They began an extensive campaign of resurrecting and popularizing this long lost celebration among the Jewish community in North America, and eventually, their efforts won out. By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jews would have Chinese food on Christmas, and light candles on a menorah during their own celebration. That celebration is known to us as Hanukkah.

One may ask, why had Hanukkah, which seems to us here in the US to be just a regular part of the holiday season, not been celebrated for so many centuries?

The answer is simple: Hanukkah is the Hebrew word for the Feast of Dedication. A feast not mentioned in the Old Testament, but rather in what we call the Apocrypha. A Greek kingdom had conquered the Holy Land not too long before the birth of Christ and converted the sacred Temple in Jerusalem into a temple of Zeus. They even went so far as to sacrifice pigs upon its altar.

A certain man named Judas Maccabaeus started an insurrection much more violent than any we have experienced in the recent past. With the help of the Romans, he was able to liberate Jerusalem, reclaim the Temple, purge it of all the pagan sacrifices, and rededicate it once again to the one true God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is in remembrance of this 'rededication' that the Feast of Dedication began to be celebrated.

However, it was not celebrated for long, for in 70 AD, the very Romans that helped to liberate the Temple would almost completely destroy it, leaving only one wall, what is now known as the Wailing Wall. Hanukkah would not be celebrated again until the rabbi mentioned before restored it, for if there is no temple, why would anyone celebrate its cleansing?

Our Lord walks in the midst of the Temple, at a time when the Temple was very much there, and when Hanukkah, that is, the Feast of Dedication was very much celebrated.

The Temple was instituted by God so that the Creator of Heaven and Earth might ever live in the midst of His people. He would not be far off as the pagans gods were said to be, either dwelling far in the stars or deep in the earth.

Rather, the true God, the God of love, would be near that which He loved, that is humanity. He would dwell in their midst, and sanctify them by His presence.

Often we are tempted to think of the Temple as a kind of big church. A sort of cathedral where religious things are done. But to the Jews it was much more than that. It was the concrete, touchable reality that their God would not abandon them, that despite their sins, their hypocrisies, their crimes, God would remain loyal to the covenant He made with Abraham *and to his children forever*. The Temple was the presence and promise of God. And to a people, as all people are, drenched in the river of their own sins, seeing such a presence, and touching such a promise was the greatest of all consolations.

Our Lord walks about the Temple, for why should He not? Being God, it is His very house, and He Himself being the fulfillment of all God's promises, it is the very symbol of His own faithfulness to mankind.

Yet the people are confused by Him: by His presence, by His words, by His miracles.

They demand of Him: *'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ tell us plainly.'*

Jesus does not tell them plainly.

Rather, He begins to talk about *sheep that hear His voice and works that He does in His Father's name*. He talks about how *those who are His follow Him*, and that *He knows who His own sheep are*. He speaks of giving them *eternal life*, and how His flock will forever be in *the Father's hand*. Finally, He ends this cryptic little speech with an even more cryptic conclusion: *'I and the Father are one.'*

They are confused, even as we would have been, and go away no more informed as they came. Yet everything they needed to know to know that Jesus was the Christ was present plainly before them, in a way that could be seen, in a way that could be touched. For Jesus and the Father *are one*, and behold, He dwells in the Temple.

He dwelt in the Temple then for the same reason that He dwelt upon the altar of the cross not long after, the same reason that He dwelt in the grave for three

days, there to rise again from death, the same reason He has dwelt upon every Christian altar every Sunday from the beginning of the Church until the end of the age, giving His body and blood to see and to touch and to taste.

He dwells that He may be not far from His people, for love does not allow for one to be far off from the beloved. He dwells that He may shepherd His flock, and feed His church, that He might console His faithful, even *in the winter* of our lives, when all seems decayed and lost, when our only song is sadness, and our only knowledge is sin; [that we might still be *before the throne of God, day and night*]. To put it simply, the Lord remains with us, that He might

*'Wipe away every tear from our eyes.'*

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*Preached by Pastor  
Fields*

*Sermon Texts: Acts  
20:17-35; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30.*