

Sunday: Third Sunday in LEnt

Date: March 7, 2021

Text: John 2:13-22

Title:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

What a mess it must have been? The courtyard of the temple littered with overturned tables. Sheep, goats, calves, and birds, some still caged or tethered, others roaming loose scattered about. Men running from the area fearing for their lives and their livelihoods. Shekels and other currency strewn on the ground like seeds sown in a field. This was not what anyone would have ever expected to see within the walls of the temple mound.

Before Jesus formed a whip out of cords of rope, the area was bustling with activity. Many booths and tables were set up to assist temple visitors and worshipers with everything they needed for their trip. There were men who would convert denarii and other currencies into shekels for payment of the temple tax. There were vendors with animals available for people to purchase and offer as a sacrifice in accordance with Levitical Law. There were Rabbis and teachers who would consult and counsel people on what they needed to do to comply with the Law of Moses. While we have no direct evidence, most scholars believe that based on Jesus' statements about turning his father's house into a den of thieves, some if not most of the vendors were not completely honest.

Thirty years earlier, when Mary and Joseph came to Jerusalem to offer the sacrifices for the birth of Jesus, the son who opened the womb of Mary, and when they returned for the purification of Mary, they probably stopped at one of these vendors and purchased the proper animals for their offering.

To understand the significance of what Jesus did that day, we need to go back in time. We need to go way back. In fact, we need to go back to the Garden of Eden. In Genesis, we are told that God created man and woman in his own image. They were without sin. Their hearts were pure. They were given dominion over the animals and plants in the garden and told to be fruitful and multiply.

Before long, though, they were tempted by the serpent and fell into sin. Their innocence destroyed by their decision, they were changed from the pure creation of God, into a fallen and broken shell of God's "very good" creation. Their hearts were corrupted by their sin, and this corruption has been handed down to all generations.

Cast out of the garden, each generation seemed to fall farther and farther away from God. Cain devalued life and murdered his brother. People became more and more self-centered, ultimately resulting in the destruction of mankind, save 8 people. As life started anew, people again lost sight of God, and did what was evil in his eyes. Yet God did not forget or stop loving his children.

When the Israelites cried out to God for rescue from Egypt, he raised up Moses to lead them out of captivity. He brought them to Mt. Sinai where he gave to them a brief outline of his will for living and loving in his communion. Ten commands were spoken to the people from the mountain. Everyone agreed to live in accordance with God's will, but within days, that agreement was breached.

Brought to the threshold of the promised land for the second time 40 years later, all the people once again vowed to obey the Law of Moses. A law that included the sacrifice of animals to pay the price in blood for the sins committed by the people. Rules about offerings, animals, and rituals at the tabernacle were given to mark the Children of Abraham as the chosen people of God.

After numerous cycles of faithfulness and apostasy, after the Babylonian captivity, after restoration to their homeland and the reconstruction of the temple, Jesus arrived in human flesh. Born of Mary, Jesus is true man and true God. He lived the life of obedience to the law of God completely. Something that no other living human was able to do.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, the beloved disciples writes,

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John continues in verse 14,

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The word used in John 1:14 translated as dwelt, is the word used for tabernacle. In essence, John is saying that Jesus tabernacled with us. The tabernacle was the place where God dwelled as identified in the Torah. This is where God would descend and sit on his throne among his people. As Solomon built the temple, the mercy seat of God moved to the temple. Centuries later, at site of the rebuilt temple, Jesus cleansed His Father's house as we heard in our Gospel reading. The new temple cleansed the old temple. The transition that occurred with the birth of Jesus, now fully reflected in the clearing out of the old, by the new source of mercy for all mankind.

What had originally been offered as a service to the weary traveler who came to the temple, had become distorted and twisted into a money-making venture. The place of prayer in the presence of God had turned into a marketplace complete with the cacophony of voices attempting to lure people to buy from them. The peacefulness of being in the location of God, shattered by the yelling of vendors as they attempt to lure unsuspecting worshipers to their table. The clanking of coins robbing people of their ability to focus on the reason for being there.

Jesus cleans out the corruption, graft, and sin from the courtyard of the temple. "Zeal for his Father's house consumed him." We are told. Jesus was shocked and appalled by the pervasive sin, residing in the presence of the Almighty God. The tabernacle/temple was the place where sin was removed, it was not to be a place for ongoing breach of the Law of Moses. The corrupt vendors thumbed their nose at the Will of God as given in the Ten Commandments and replace the God of the fathers with a god of riches and fame.

As I considered this passage it struck me that Jesus' zeal for His Father's house has not abated. I would imagine that after Jesus left the temple compound, the vendors came back and picked up the pieces of their businesses. The next day, while they might have been a little nervous about Jesus coming back, they returned to business as it had been. The cleansing of Jesus was short-lived as the vendors returned to the sins they had been committing before the disruption.

Paul writes to the Christians at Corinth,

¹⁶Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

By the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we are made into a temple of our God. We are where he resides. He sits on his throne in our hearts.

Jesus love for his creation, is the love of the Father for all of creation. Jesus as he resides with the Holy Spirit in our hearts is zealous for the temple of the Father. We are that temple.

We who are fallen and corrupt humans, are the treasure of the Father. Jesus is zealous to protect us and to drive out the sinful behaviors that take up residence in the house of the Father. He does not do this by destroying us in the flesh. Instead, he convicts us of our sins and offers us forgiveness and reconciliation. His death on the cross paid the price for the sins that have taken up residence within us.

In this season of Lent, we are called to reflect on the temple of the Lord within us. Are we maintaining a temple suitable for the residence of God, or are we surrounding the throne of God with competing interests? Are we maintaining a place of reverence and worship for our Lord, or is the din of competing voices and ideas drawing our attention away from the person and work of our Savior?

At the beginning of our worship service each week, we are called to reflect upon our fallen condition and our need for forgiveness. We confess our sins and ask for forgiveness and strength to resist further temptation and sin.

As we confess our sins, the cleansing flood of Jesus' blood and righteousness drives out the sin that has taken up residence in our hearts. The sin that creates so much noise in our lives keeps us from worshiping the Father in spirit and truth. Jesus drives out the evil that tries to draw us away from receiving the gifts of God. As the tables of our sins are overturned, as the idols of our making are cast down and scattered, we are cleansed and renewed by the spirit of God.

In the absolution you and I are made right with God. As a free gift we are given grace. We receive the unmerited favor of God as he takes away the stain of our sin. In Jesus we are restored. But that is not where the gifts end. Our Father feeds and nurtures us with his word. In the Scriptures read and the message proclaimed he builds up our knowledge and wisdom in the redemption won for us on the cross. God then gives us the very body and blood of Jesus to feed us,

forgive us, and strengthen us for the days that lay before us. He does all this not because of our goodness and merit, but he does it out of love for us as his children.

As Jesus performs his cleansing work in our heart, as he resides within us, as he strengthens us to resist the return of the sinful noise that distracts us from God, he keeps us in the one true faith, until the day when the sinless innocence of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is restored to us and we live with our God in the new heaven and the new earth.

Amen.