



SAINT LUKE'S

LENT 3
YEAR B

NUMBERS 21:4-9
EPHESIANS 2:1-10
JOHN 3:14-21
PSALM 107:1-3, 17-22

A SERMON BY THE REV. WILLIAM OGBURN
MARCH 4, 2018

✠ In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Here in the third Sunday in Lent, we have John's account of Jesus and the money-changers in the Temple. This is not sweet Jesus, meek and mild. He's angry at what he sees and he does something about it then and there. At first, we may think that Jesus is angered because there is business going on in the Temple. But actually, there were no laws being broken. You heard the ten commandments read earlier during the first lesson. Which laws were being broken? Why were there money-changers and livestock there? It was for sacrifice, of course. Animals were offered on the altar in the Temple and people who came to Jerusalem to make their sacrificial offering would often buy an animal at the Temple rather than bring one from home. This was a convenient service being offered. As Jerusalem was then under the Roman Empire, Roman coins were the official currency. The money-changers were there to change the Roman coins bearing effigies of government officials into shekels, so that people could pay the Temple tax with coins not bearing "graven images." I will refer you back to Commandment number two.

It must have been quite the scene: whipped cattle and sheep hurrying in a perhaps stampede-like escape; feathers falling in the air as the doves try to get free from their cages; overturning tables thudding on the ground as hundreds of clinking coins fall all around. It must have been utter chaos. And Jesus says to the dove sellers, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" Scholars debate whether the whip of cords was used on people or just the animals. I think you can make a very solid case in Greek that the whip is only used on the animals and not on the people.

"Zeal for your house will consume me" is taken from Psalm 69.

According to John, the disciples make this connection in processing Jesus' actions in the Temple. There is a two-fold understanding here of the Temple and of Jesus himself. The Jews understood that the Temple is the place where God's glory dwells. And Jesus is speaking about his own body as the place where God's glory dwells, but no one seems to understand what he is saying. The term "the Jews" here simply means those around him. The Jews were his own people. Just prior to Jesus clearing the Temple, he had been in Cana and given his first Sign at the wedding, having changed water into wine.¹ He was at a Jewish feast with this Jewish mother in a Jewish town.

The Jews are his people. But they are only reacting to his driving everyone out of the Temple. They don't react to anything he says. Jesus calls the Temple "my Father's house," as if he's saying it belongs to him in a certain way, since it is the house of his Father. It's the place where God's glory dwells. Jesus, speaking of his own body, is saying that the place where God's glory dwells certainly can be destroyed. He's not saying "You can't touch me." He's being vulnerable. But he also promises that if it is destroyed, it will be raised in three days' time. But they can't hear what he is saying. They can only think of the physical building of the Temple. It is hearkening back to the beginning of John's Gospel, which says, "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."²

I think Jesus' anger was sparked by the routinization and convenience of the Temple sacrifices. Theodore of Mopsuestia argued in the 4th century

¹ John 2: 1-11

² John 1: 10-13

that Jesus was clearing the way from animal sacrifice altogether. What if Jesus was angered because this is not the kind of sacrifice God desires? What if Jesus thought we were missing the point altogether? What if Jesus' anger was rooted in Psalm 51? "Had you desired it, I would have offered sacrifice, but you take no delight in burnt offerings. The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."³

It's our hearts God wants: hearts that are broken from selfishness and our own will...hearts that are sorry for things 'done and left undone.'⁴ God wants hearts that grow in God's love and hearts that die to self. God wants hearts that are lifted high in the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. But we can't have those hearts lifted high when there are things weighing us down. That's the work of Lent. At every Eucharist, think about what lifting high your heart looks like when we say, "Lift up your hearts. We lift them to the Lord."⁵

Jesus displayed righteous anger at sin...the broken relationship between God and God's people. It was Jesus' zeal for the purity of God's Household...his desire for the people to have hearts lifted high to God, and he knew all of this stuff was in the way. There is a quotation attributed to Augustine of Hippo that says: "Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are."

We can understand a little bit about righteous anger. On Ash Wednesday this year, 17 people, mostly students, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida were shot to death at the hands of a gunman wielding an AR-15. One of the victims was a 16-year-old named Carmen Schentrup. She was an Episcopalian and one of the youth group

³ *Book of Common Prayer*, 657.

⁴ *Book of Common Prayer*, 393.

⁵ *Book of Common Prayer*, 361.

leaders at St Mary Magdalene Church in Coral Springs. In outrage at the deaths of their friends and their lack of safety, survivors have begun to fight back. Finding themselves in a society numbed by frequent mass gun killings, and repulsed by the tiresome trope of “thoughts and prayers” by their political leaders, students like Cameron Kasky and David Hogg, and many of their fellow students, who survived this massacre, have taken their anger and applied courage to it. They have risen to say “Never Again” because the adults who are responsible for their safety just won’t. Like Jesus, they are cleansing the Temple, and in their zeal they are saying that the sacrifices laid on the altar of the NRA, gun lobby, and gun manufacturers are making a mockery of God’s Household. They bring us hope.

Out of anger applied with courage, the students here at St Luke’s School want their voices to be heard on this matter. In their zeal, they have planned a walk-out on Wednesday, March 14th. They have planned this walk-out themselves with the school’s permission. They will walk out of their classrooms and publically gather on the front steps of the Church and will hold 17 minutes of silence, one for each Parkland victim. A bell will toll every minute. They they will come into the Church and recite poems and give speeches about how these weapons are hurting and affecting them. Then they will go back to their classrooms to write to their political leaders. Perhaps you saw last Sunday’s New York Times ad where New York City Private School Heads all signed a statement speaking out against gun violence in our schools, including our own Head of School, Mr Bart Baldwin. Many public schools have now voiced their desire to join this movement. This is cleansing the Temple and it brings us hope.

Sanctification and salvation are all God's activity. Jesus' resurrection is all God's activity. We can't save ourselves ~ and at the same time, that doesn't let us off the hook of being faithful. God's love is unconditional, but it's not without expectations. We who have known the transforming work of God in our lives through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus must examine our hearts. Lent is a time for us to reflect on our lives and to examine the things that get in the way of turning towards God. It is a time to look at how we can redirect and reorient ourselves away from our selfishness, from our self-centeredness and towards God as the center. It's a time for us to be careful of allowing good acts and intentions to encroach on what belongs to God. It's a time for us to reflect on how we fill our lives with things that don't really belong there. Now is a time to ask God to cleanse the altars of our hearts ~ that, because of Jesus Christ, with hearts lifted high, our lives may be a living sacrifice to God's praise and glory.

✠ In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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