

Sermon for 3 Lent, Year B
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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The story of Jesus cleansing the temple is found in all four gospels. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is found during the last week of Jesus' life, after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, with the crowds yelling, "Hosanna!" John, however, puts this story right up at the beginning. In fact, this is the first truly public act of Jesus in the Gospel of John. He has been baptized, he has called together the disciples, and right before this, he changed the water into wine at the wedding feast, but that was a private miracle, if you will, done in the back room before the servants. Now, Jesus is ready publicly to announce his presence, and what does he do? He goes into the very heart of Judaism, the temple at Jerusalem, and he ticks off a lot of powerful people.

These poor people had a nice comfortable little system. Everybody is supposed to come to the temple for Passover. Everybody is supposed to make sacrifice and pay dues for the support of the temple. But of course, any coinage with idolatrous images on it (such as an image of Caesar) cannot be used for these religious purposes. So, for a price, we'll change your money for you, and we'll sell you a sacrificial animal. And, for a cut, the temple officials will let all this take place right here in the outer precincts of the temple itself for everyone's convenience. All these ceremonial rules make for a nice, tidy profit.

The problem with Jesus, though, is that he takes over the place. He walks into this tidy little operation and starts acting like he's in charge. The prophecies have finally been fulfilled. The Lord has come to his temple. And he proceeds to set things in order. For St. John, this act of the Lord's is paradigmatic. That's why it comes at the beginning of the story. It is essentially an announcement of what Jesus came to do. He came to clean house and to take charge.

But the way in which he takes charge seems odd to us. The servants who have been in charge while the master was away are not happy about this turn of affairs, and they question his authority to do these things. "What sign have you to show us for doing this?" This is simply another instance of people challenging Jesus to prove himself. And Jesus points to his death and resurrection as the basis of his authority. The disciples understood him only after his resurrection. "Destroy this temple (that is my body), and in three days I will raise it up." That's my sign. Because I am the Lord of the universe, I will give myself for the redemption of my creation. That is my mastery.

It's a wonderful story when it happens to other people. And that's usually the way we think of it. If we think of ourselves in relation to this story, we usually think of ourselves as Jesus. It's used as a paradigm of righteous anger. All of this

is why it is perhaps one of the most misused texts in the entire bible. Jesus drew a parallel between himself and the temple, and since we are to emulate him, we should do the same. We should think of ourselves not as the Lord coming to his temple, nor as the tradesmen trying to make a buck, but as the temple to which the Lord comes, and from which he drives all that does not belong.

In every mass, we ask for this. “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit...” “pardon and deliver you from all your sins...” “Oh Lamb of God that takest away the sins of the world...” Elsewhere, St. Paul calls the body the “temple of the Holy Spirit.” In a sense, everything in our worship is an acknowledgment that the Lord, the Holy Spirit, has come to this his temple and is in the process of driving out all that is not of him. And yet in a mystery, I am involved in that process. In every mass, we also are reminded to examine ourselves. The summary of the law is just that: “Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.” This is a summation of the ten commandments. And when we say “Lord have mercy,” we remember that God is a jealous God, not content with half-measures. If I am the house of God, then Jesus is consumed with zeal for the purity of this house. And so the purification goes on.

Perhaps none of us have a statue of Molech or Baal or Asherah at home to which we bow down. But in what ways do we serve riches, or power, or sexual fulfillment? What do we sacrifice to these things? How many of us have invoked the name of God recently without due consideration of the weight of that invocation? How many of us have actually kept a day sanctified to God this week, in which we did no work or business? Do you truly cherish your father and your mother, regardless of what’s in it for you? How recently have you even wished you could kill another human being, or have a sexual partner who was not your spouse? How many of us, in the last week, have said something about someone else that was not true or that we were not sure was true? How often do we wish we had someone else’s stuff? And now remember that to break any of these is to break the whole law.

Now if you’re thinking it’s impossible not to sin, that the bar is set too high, and that there is no way you can really keep the law, you’re in good company. It is exactly this tortuous struggle with sin that St. Paul describes for us in Romans chapter 7. He says, “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.” He’s even gotten to the point of really wanting to do what’s right. “For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members.” There is still a disordered part of us: our flesh. Not just the physical flesh on our bones, but the principle in us of being fleshly, of having been “sold under sin” and made slaves to our sinful passions rather than servants of God. The war rages, not just around us, but in us. We ourselves are the battle ground.

And so, St. Paul says, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” And the answer comes immediately, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” It is only Jesus who can win this war in us. He is the one who has the mastery in his cross and resurrection. It is with and through him that we can “crucify our flesh, with its passions and desires” as St. Paul says in Galatians 5. Thanks be to God!

But remember what we are thanking him for. We are thanking him for coming in and taking charge. He gives himself for us. But we must give ourselves to him. His zeal for us consumes him, and he will not have just part of us. He will have the whole person. And so he comes to his temple, and makes a whip of cords, and drives the thievery and adultery and idolatry out of us. And let’s face it. That hurts business as usual.

We can respond like the Jews in the temple. “What right does he have to destroy my life?” “Who does he think he is?” “Give us a sign.” Or we can respond like St. Paul. “Thanks be to God that Jesus is our master!”

But to be truly thankful is to respond with thanksgiving to the whip plied on our passions. It is to be joyful that the master is at home, rather than sullen about our own loss of independence. It is to fling ourselves without reservation into the battle over our own souls, embracing the destruction of our flesh, exulting in sacrificial obedience to him who gave himself for us.

Lord have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep thy law.