**Weekend of Sunday, March 3, 2024**

**3rd Sunday in Lent/Lectionary X/Year B**

**First Reading: Exodus 20:1-17**

**Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25**

**Gospel Reading: John 2:13-22**

**Sermon Title: *“Cleansing the Temple of our Hearts”***

**Theme**

*The third covenant in this year’s Lenten readings is the central one of Israel’s history: the gift of the law to those God freed from slavery. The commandments begin with the statement that because God alone has freed us from the powers that oppressed us, we are to let nothing else claim first place in our lives. When Jesus throws the merchants out of the Temple, he is defending the worship of God alone and rejecting the ways commerce and profit-making can become our gods. The Ten Commandments are essential to our baptismal call: centered first in God’s liberating love, we strive to live out justice and mercy in our communities and the world.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Exodus 20:1-17**

1God spoke all these words:  
 2I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3you shall have no other gods before me.  
 4You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.  
 7You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.  
 8Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.  
 12Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.  
 13You shall not murder.  
 14You shall not commit adultery.  
 15You shall not steal.  
 16You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.  
 17You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

**Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25**

18The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19For it is written,   
 “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
  and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”  
20Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

**Gospel: John 2:13-22**

13The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14In the Temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the Temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” 17His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” 18The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” 19Jesus answered them, “Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” 20The Jews then said, “This Temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” 21But he was speaking of the Temple of his body. 22After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

**Sermon**

With the weather we have been having, it is difficult to remember that we are still in the season of astronomical winter until Mar 19. “Lent,” the word we use for the liturgical season we are in, comes from an Old English word, “lencten” which means “spring.” However, Lent can begin as early as February 4, making Easter as early as Mar 22, which would barely be out of astronomical winter! All that was my clever segue into the concept of spring cleaning.

Here is a spring cleaning pun for you. People are always worried about their computers, cell phones, or Alexa’s spying on them. Truth is, those are not the devices you need to be concerned about. It’s your vacuum cleaner that should give you pause. Why? It’s been collecting dirt on you for years.

Another one? Spring cleaning won’t kill you …., but why take the chance?

Today as we continue on this sacred journey through the season of Lent, we are called to reflect deeply on the significance of our baptism into Christ Jesus. Today, our hearts are drawn to the Gospel of John, specifically to the account of Jesus doing some spring cleansing of the Temple. Within these verses lies a profound invitation for us to examine the temple of our hearts, to cleanse it of all that hinders our relationship with God, and to embrace the transformative power of our baptismal union with Christ.

Before we can get into the details of the Gospel Reading from John, we have a little housekeeping to do ourselves. Please note that the Gospel Reading is the Gospel “according” to John. While John was indeed a disciple, then apostle of Jesus Christ, and certainly a first-hand eyewitness to His ministry, it is unlikely that the evangelist, John took pen and papyrus and wrote the gospel that bears his name.

Bible scholars think that the Gospel according to John was transmitted orally for years and when it appeared that Jesus’s return was not imminent, and the original apostles were getting old and dying off, someone said, “Hey, we ought to write this stuff down,” and that is how it came to be published. Those same Bible scholars think the Gospel according to John was written between 90 and 100 CE, some 60-70 years after the Resurrection, making it highly unlikely that the actual author was a first-hand eyewitness of Jesus’s ministry.

Additionally, the Romans razed Jerusalem in 70 CE, leaving it a pile of rubble. So whoever wrote the Gospel of John, could not have seen what Jesus and John saw on the day today’s Gospel Reading took place.

And speaking of the day today’s Gospel Reading took place, notice that we are only in John chapter 2. No one knows why, but somehow John’s version of the cleansing of the Temple was included at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry, whereas the other three synoptic gospels include it during Holy Week.

“Well, thanks, Pastor! You make it sound like John’s Gospel can’t be believed!” That is not what I said. On the contrary, that the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple is included in all four gospels, makes it highly likely that it did actually take place. The author of the Gospel according to John, just included it in the wrong place – for reasons we no longer know.

That needed to be said because verse 14 reads,

14In the Temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

PIC 1

Just to be clear, the merchants and money changers were not “in the Temple” and never were. Historians, archeologists, and archeological excavations indicate that this business took place on a courtyard outside the southern wall of the Temple Mount.

PIC 2

In the reading, we encounter Jesus entering the Temple complex in Jerusalem during the Passover festival. What he finds there is a scene of chaos and commercialism, as merchants and money changers conduct their business within the sacred precincts of the Temple. In response to this desecration of His Father’s house of prayer, Jesus takes decisive action, overturning the tables of the money changers and driving out those who were buying and selling.

Now, we preachers have to be very careful in how we handle the situation in this story because we do not want to portray our Lord Jesus as a man who can’t control His anger, righteous or not. And we don’t want to encourage you to use Jesus’s behavior in this story to justify your bad behavior in your situations. The same story in the context of Holy Week, as Matthew, Mark, and Luke have it, seems to indicate that Jesus was provoking the religious leaders to take action against him, resulting in His crucifixion, yes, but also the salvation of the world.

This dramatic act of cleansing the Temple serves as more than simple housecleaning. It serves as a powerful symbol of Jesus' authority and His zeal for the purity of His Father’s house. It is a manifestation of His righteous indignation at the exploitation and corruption that had infiltrated the worship of God. In cleansing the Temple, Jesus reveals His uncompromising commitment to the holiness of God and the integrity of true worship. We should take notes.

Following the cleansing of the Temple, the religious leaders challenge Jesus, demanding a sign to justify His actions. In response, Jesus offers a cryptic prophecy:

19"Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

Unbeknownst to them, Jesus is speaking of the temple of His body, foreshadowing His impending death and resurrection.

This mysterious statement invites us to consider the temple of our own hearts. Just as Jesus cleansed the physical Temple in Jerusalem, He also desires to cleanse and renew the inner sanctuary of our souls. Our hearts are meant to be dwelling places for the Holy Spirit, holy and set apart for God's purposes. Yet, like the merchants and money changers, we often allow worldly desires and distractions to take precedence, cluttering the sacred space within us. We allow our lives of discipleship to become stale and routine. Sometimes it might feel like all we’re doing is getting our Christian worship timecard punched. That is not good enough!

Central to our understanding of baptism is the recognition of its transformative power in uniting us with Christ in His death and resurrection. In Romans 6, the apostle Paul writes:

Romans 6:3-4"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

If we were baptized as an infant or an adult in the Lutheran tradition, or any of the mainline traditions, when we were baptized, the sign of the cross was made on our foreheads. At Zion, we do this with chrism oil. Eventually, the oil washes off, but the cross never does. Our baptism into Christ Jesus signifies not only our identification with His death and resurrection but also our participation in the ongoing work of our redemption and renewal. Through the waters of baptism, we are cleansed from sin, born anew by the Spirit, and empowered to live as children of God. Baptism marks the beginning of our journey of faith, as we are called to continually die to sin and rise to newness of life in Christ.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

As we continue to journey with Jesus toward the cross that awaits Him in Jerusalem through the season of Lent, let us heed the call to cleanse the temple of our hearts, allowing the light of Christ to illuminate every corner and crevice. Here are some practical steps we can take to facilitate this process:

Repentance: Just as Jesus called the people to repentance in the Temple, let us humble ourselves before God, acknowledging our need for His forgiveness and mercy. Confessing our sins opens the way for God's cleansing and healing grace to flow into our lives. I hope you have noticed and taken advantage of that dwell time I include just before we corporately confess our sins. That time is for us to reflect on the sins we need to confess – at least for me, it’s not enough time, and I confess every day.

Renunciation: Like Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers, let us identify and renounce anything that hinders our relationship with God. This may include sinful habits, unhealthy attachments, or worldly distractions that draw us away from the life of faith. If you were here for our Wednesday night Lenten presentation then you participated in enumerating many bad habits. It was candid and fun, and I was not surprised what people confessed as bad habits.

Renewal: As baptized believers, let us embrace the promise of newness of life in Christ. Through prayer, study of scripture, and participation in the sacraments, and other spiritual disciplines, let us cultivate a deeper intimacy with God and allow His Spirit to transform us from the inside out. This is the purpose and meaning of the journey of Lent.

As we contemplate the cleansing of the Temple in the Gospel according to John, may we be inspired to do some spring cleaning; to embark on a journey of spiritual renewal during this season of Lent. Let us invite Jesus into the temple of our hearts, trusting in His power to cleanse, heal, and make us holy. He will do it if we invite Him in! May we emerge from this season of reflection and repentance, renewed in our commitment to live as His faithful disciples, bearing witness to the transformative power of our baptism into Christ Jesus.

**Prayer**

Merciful God, accompany our journey rough these forty days. Renew us in the gifts of baptism that we may:

* provide for those who are poor,
* pray for those in need,
* fast from self-indulgence,

and above all, that we may find our treasure in the life of your Son Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen