

March 7, 2021

Third Sunday in Lent

Psalm 19

John 2: 13-22

Pandemic Lessons

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Today is the third Sunday in Lent, which means we are in the middle of our Lenten journey. Meaning if you are like me you have decided to give up a few things during this season as your personal sacrifice. This also means that on a few occasions you have forgotten that you have given up these things and you panic a little when you realize you almost ... Or is that just me?

The text today is situated in a peculiar place in the Gospel of John. Most of us have read this passage a few times and have immediately noticed the behavior of Jesus Christ. However, I believe there are two stories that are happening simultaneously that have a lot to teach us. First is the story of Christ that we know well, and second is the story of the people hidden between the lines.

We are going to begin today with the latter, the story of the people. Like us, the Jews in the text this morning were engaging in their own personal sacrifices as they celebrate the Passover Festival. Now some believe that Passover is a significant marker in the ministry life of Jesus Christ, however, today I just want us to understand why they have this festival. Passover, also called the Feast of Unleavened Bread, is a reminder of God delivering the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery. Each year, the observance of Passover rekindled the flame of hope among the Jewish groups. So they would travel from all over to Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice to God in honor of this festival.

It all began with the preparation of the people. For most people this was a highlight for the year, which meant they needed to prepare in advance to offer their best to God. They would have to figure out travel because they didn't live in Jerusalem so they would embark on a journey just to come to the temple with their sacrifice. No bicycles, cars, no trains or buses, not even an airplane to make this a quick ride. And they probably began walking one or two weeks before the festival.

In addition, there were two others options people would have needed to figure out before their journey. First, to find an animal without blemish to bring with them. These words "without blemish" are referring to the

understanding that what they brought forth to God was blameless, innocent, unimpaired and in some sense perfect. In the Old testament the animal was typically a young goat, but here we see other animals for people to choose from. I think it had to do with accessibility. Second, they would have been saving all year to offer monetary donations to the temple as well, some called it their per capita. The Jews were not rich by any standard, didn't have bank accounts to hold onto savings, and often just lived off the land.

Then there was the preparation of the Priests. The job of the Priests was to be keepers and teachers of the Law, but also to maintain the temple. So in the days leading up to the festival I would imagine they were cleaning the temple and temple courts to welcome the people in. They were probably looking for places to store what the people brought and set up a place for people to bring their monetary offerings.

Since we know that there were people selling animals and money changers, I would imagine that they were coordinating who they would allow to do these things. This story is about a people who only had one thing on their mind, which was following the traditions of the festival and they would do whatever it took to fulfill their end of the deal.

Now remember I said that there were two stories happening at the same time. Here is the story of Christ and what we see.

We begin with the obvious, Jesus made a "whip of cords," "drove all from the temple courts," and "overturned their tables." But why? The Jesus Christ we know is more passive and allows his vast knowledge to change minds. When he wants to show the people who he is, he uses signs and words, not violence. Yet this Jesus is more vocal and shows us a side of him we had never seen. In many ways it is strange to think that he would drive people out of the temple in this way, but the Passover Festival was very important.

And everything that the temple stood for was being taken advantage of. The Priests allowed the people to sell livestock and the money changers to exchange currency, which came with a hefty fee, all in the temple courts. The priests knew that these things were necessary for the people who were coming to Jerusalem and I imagine they just wanted to make some things easier after they had journeyed so far. They also knew that these sacrifices and offerings would benefit them long term. I'm not saying it was the right thing to do, but they had a reason. Jesus realized that they had lost sight of what this festival was truly about.

The part that leaves me truly astonished is that Jesus arrived, stopped to see what was happening in the temple courts, and made a whip. Meaning he had to find some string, braid it together and then use it. I know in the heat of the moment with my own rage, I am not thinking about stopping to make a weapon to destroy things, but he did. So we get a glimpse of just how angry he was that this was happening in his "father's house." And then when asked what authority he has, Jesus answered "destroy this temple and I will raise it in three days." He does not say I am the Son of God, he doesn't begin a parable, but instead he warns of his own destruction that is to come.

Where these two stories collide is where we find ourselves today. After hearing all these things, I could say to flip over every table that stands in your way. I could say be like Jesus and let your righteous anger change everything around you. But that is not where my heart is, nor is it what I see in front of me. Sometimes you realize there are several lessons to learn in the same story, and sometimes you imagine what it would be like if we could have seen the full picture.

The full picture for us today is that it is day 651 of pandemic living. Well that's not accurate, but it's been almost a year, we are tired and no longer thinking the same as we were before. So I thought I'd tell you about a few of my pandemic lessons I've learned to this point which have helped me to view this text differently.

First, we no longer know what a routine is and most of it has become mundane. Mundane life can change how we view what is important and even sacred to us. The priests were trusted to keep the laws and customs of the Jewish people. They had been celebrating the Passover Festival for years and didn't see anything wrong with what was happening in the temple courts. Sure it was not right, but they believed it to be necessary for the people and would benefit the bigger picture. Their intentions were good and the reasons for their behavior, but the outcome was not in their favor. Lesson number one: our intentions help explain the reason, but they cannot shield us from the consequences – good or bad.

Second, Jesus said to them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" Just like the people, we have been stuck in the cycle of the pandemic, any glimpse of something different seems like a far-fetched idea. So much so that we would rather sit in the harsh reality and wait than allow ourselves to see beyond the current circumstances. It's not that we do not have hope, rather it's just so comfortable not allowing ourselves to be disappointed. Lesson number two: we are so comfortable with what has fallen, that it is difficult to see how it will be rebuilt or restored.

Third, Jesus Christ flipped tables and for good reason. God doesn't say I'm going to tap Khayla on the shoulder and ask her to make this left turn instead of following her own instructions. What I know about myself is that I will naturally do what is the easiest, unless I find something worth doing. But even in those moments I need God to push me outside of my comfort zone and take away the chance to go back. Lesson number three: Christ is still here to shock us into rhythm because we can't just change, something has to shift.

The Lenten season is a time of self-evaluation and repentance. So when we get to the middle of the 40-day journey we can look at ourselves and ask: "Have I been honest with myself? Have I forgotten why I chose to do

this? Did I see where Jesus flipped my table?" If I did, why am I not trying to pick up the pieces instead of trying to ask Jesus what authority he has here. These are not the first lessons and they won't be the last. But sometimes obvious answers can distract us from the true questions within. So what are you asking yourself?

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