

Third Sunday in Lent

March 7, 2021



Introduction

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.

Confession and Forgiveness

Blessed be the holy Trinity, Father, ✚ Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, the keeper of the covenant, the source of steadfast love, our rock and our redeemer. **Amen.**

God hears us when we cry, and draws us close in Jesus Christ. Let us return to the one who is full of compassion.

Silence is kept for reflection.

Fountain of living water, **pour out your mercy over us.**
Our sin is heavy, and we long to be free.
Rebuild what we have ruined and mend what we have torn.
Wash us in your cleansing flood.
Make us alive in the Spirit to follow in the way of Jesus,
as healers and restorers of the world you so love. Amen.

Beloved, God's word never fails.
The promise rests on grace: by the saving love of Jesus Christ,
the wisdom and power of God, your sins are ✚ forgiven,
and God remembers them no more.
Journey in the way of Jesus. **Amen.**

Gathering Hymn ELW # 803/LBW #482 *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*

Listen and sing along [here](#).

Prayer of the Day

Holy God, through your Son you have called us to live faithfully and act courageously. Keep us steadfast in your covenant of grace, and teach us the wisdom that comes only through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

First Reading: Exodus 20:1-17

After escaping from slavery, the Israelites come to Mount Sinai, where God teaches them how to live in community. The Ten Commandments proclaim that God alone is worthy of worship. Flowing from God, the life of the community flourishes when based on honesty, trust, fidelity, and respect for life, family, and property.

Read the text [here](#).

Psalmody: Psalm 19

¹The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky proclaims its maker's handiwork.

²**One day tells its tale to another, and one night imparts knowledge to another.**

³Although they have no words or language, and their voices are not heard,

⁴**their sound has gone out into all lands, and their message to the ends of the world, where God has pitched a tent for the sun.**

⁵It comes forth like a bridegroom out of his chamber;
it rejoices like a champion to run its course.

⁶**It goes forth from the uttermost edge of the heavens and runs about to the end of it again; nothing is hidden from its burning heat.**

⁷The teaching of the LORD is perfect and revives the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure and gives wisdom to the simple.

⁸**The statutes of the LORD are just and rejoice the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear and gives light to the eyes.**

⁹The fear of the LORD is clean and endures forever;
the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

¹⁰**More to be desired are they than gold, more than much fine gold,
sweeter far than honey, than honey in the comb.**

¹¹By them also is your servant enlightened, and in keeping them there is great reward.

¹²**Who can detect one's own offenses? Cleanse me from my secret faults.**

¹³Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins; let them not get dominion over me; then shall I be whole and sound, and innocent of a great offense.

¹⁴**Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.**

Gospel: John 2:13-22

Jesus attacks the commercialization of religion by driving merchants out of the temple. When challenged, he responds mysteriously, with the first prediction of his own death and resurrection. In the midst of a seemingly stable religious center, Jesus suggests that the center itself has changed.

Read the text [here](#).

Reflection on the Text

It seems really strange to read about Jesus defending worship in the temple during a time when we are – for the safety of all – choosing to worship from home on a computer screen or by reading a printed service on paper or gathered in our cars listening to a radio broadcast outside our church buildings.

But there is actually a very timely connection and reassurance for us. Let me see if I can explain...

In the days just before Passover, Jesus has visited Jerusalem and of course goes to worship at the temple while he is in the city. This year, we read about this event from John's gospel instead of one of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). That makes a difference because those gospels all place this story at the end of Jesus' ministry, near the events of Holy Week, including Jesus' death and resurrection.

John places this event in chapter two, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, right after the transformation of many gallons of water into the best quality wine at the wedding in Cana. Fresh from that astonishing miracle at Cana, Jesus has entered Jerusalem quietly – but he does not remain quiet for long.

When he goes to the temple – the center of worship life for all the people of Israel – he discovers the courtyards are filled with noise and activity.

They are filled with shopkeepers who would purchase the grain or other items visitors on pilgrimage brought from home (probably with Roman money), moneychangers who could change those Roman coins into proper Jewish shekels, vendors who would only accept shekels for the purchase of the animals to be used for sacrifice, and who knows – maybe even some others selling trinkets and souvenirs for your journey.

Imagine the crowd, the noise, the smell – after all, cattle and sheep and birds for sacrifice make a mess – that all must have filled the temple courtyards. Courtyards that were also the only place that non-Jewish visitors and women and children could gather for worship, because they were excluded from the inside of the temple. Only the Jewish men were allowed to enter inside that sacred space to worship.

Jesus is appalled at what a distraction this has all become from true worship. Worship that is described in many places in the Old Testament not in terms of the sacrifices, but as acts of mercy and justice.

So Jesus goes on a rampage – overturning tables, spilling out the vendors merchandise and money and scattering animals. When questioned about his reasons and his right to do this, he tells the temple authorities that if the temple is destroyed, he could raise it up in three days.

That of course, seems ridiculous to those authorities who are still overseeing the rebuilding of the temple after its destruction – construction which has already been going on for 46 years. But instead of forgiving his behavior or dismissing his apparently crazy words, this event marks him as a troublemaker. And those same authorities begin to watch his every move and report all the things that he does; making a list of charges that they will eventually use against him at his trial at another Passover festival, leading to his crucifixion and death.

The good news for us in all of this lies in the real meaning behind Jesus’ words. Jesus was telling those Jewish authorities that while the temple was a grand and important building, it was not the true center for all worship. Jesus himself – his own body, his presence among them – and with us - is the center of worship. This is also the first hint in John’s gospel that after Jesus dies, he will be raised up again in three days.

While we would like to be gathering inside our sanctuaries for worship, because that is the “way we have always done it,” it is not sufficient reason to risk harm to others during this lengthy Covidtide. Instead, we can take comfort in the knowledge that Jesus Christ himself is the center of our worship, wherever we are.

Whether you are at home, watching on a screen from your recliner or reading this in print at your kitchen table or gathered in your car in a parking lot, this is still true worship.

Jesus has promised to be with us always and God continues to be at work through the Holy Spirit in us and with us. We are still truly worshipping regardless of our location, as long as we gather around the true temple of God, the Living Word, God’s only Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hymn of the Day ELW # 772 / LBW # 480

Oh, That the Lord Would Guide My Ways

Listen and sing along [here](#).

Apostles' Creed

We profess our faith with the whole church in all times and places:

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.*
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

Prayers of Intercession

Relying on the promises of God, we pray boldly for the church, the world, and all in need.

A brief silence.

There is no God before you. Purify the faith of your church, that your people place their trust in nothing beside you. Your name is holy. Guide your church, that in every situation your people's words and actions honor your name.

Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

The heavens declare your glory. Renew your creation. Provide leaders in the struggle for clean air and water; protect creatures and crops that rely on healthy ecosystems; give all people the willingness to repent when our way of life pollutes the earth and skies.

Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Your foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. Fill leaders with the foolishness of your peace and mercy. Your law defends the vulnerable. Work through legislators, judicial systems, and systems of law enforcement to protect the wellbeing and freedom of all. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Your weakness is stronger than human strength. Protect those who are vulnerable and give courage to all who are suffering especially those we name now. Defend victims of crime and bring redemption to those who have harmed others. Give sabbath rest to all who labor. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

You call us to proclaim Christ crucified. Give clarity to this congregation and our leaders, so that we might follow Christ beyond our own habits and comfort. Clear out anything in our common life that would obscure the gospel or that serves our own interests. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Here other intercessions may be offered.

The cross of Christ is your power for all who are being saved. Thank you for all the martyrs whose witness reveals the power of the cross. Give us the same trust in life and in death. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

We entrust ourselves and all our prayers to you, O faithful God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Closing Hymn ELW # 793 / WOV # 776

Be Thou My Vision

Listen and sing along [here](#).

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Today's reflection was written by Pastor Ruth Ann Sipe.