

A Sermon for Lent iii
St. Paul's Episcopal Church – Greenville – March 15, 2009
Text: John 2: 13-22

In gratitude I acknowledge the reflections of Larry Gillick, S.J. at Creighton University and The Rev. Suzanne Guthrie

Good morning!

Today's Gospel reading begins, "the Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem." We are only in the second chapter of John and Jesus is already at the Passover? From the very first line of John's Gospel, we know that this telling of Jesus life is going to be different from what we've heard in the other three Gospels. It appears that John's intent was to highlight certain events as soon as possible so he could "get to the point" early on.

Reading on we would hear of at least three Passovers in John's account of Jesus life, ministry, death and resurrection. This is different than the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. They tell of only one Passover -- the Passover that led to Jesus death. John begins his gospel with Jesus as an adult and tells the story of his public ministry covering the span of about three years.

The introduction of John the Baptist was important. Jesus baptism and his 40 days in the wilderness were crucial – these stories tell that Jesus was called by God and set out to discern that call. So here we are today – outside the Temple of Jerusalem, the heart of the Israelite nation and religion. It is the time of the Passover and people are coming to the temple to celebrate this important event in their history – God bringing them out of Egypt. It was not unusual to find animals at these holy times. Sacrifice was a part of their religious expression and, no different then than now, people were eager to render services when services were needed. Animals were being sold and monies were being exchanged (from Jewish currency to Roman currency) for the purpose of taxes. These transactions had been occurring outside the temple for years yet today they would be seen with new eyes. The secular was edging its way into the sacred – God's saving mercy was being marketed! A truth, Jesus was about to expose.

The chaos that follows must have been very disorienting. With cords twined together, Jesus created a whip that proceeded to startle and push the animals away from the site. Tables were overturned and money was scattered everywhere. His zeal was all consuming. As written by Suzanne Guthrie, this was the same zeal "which inspired Simeon to wait in his last days for the Christ, and Anna to devote the whole of her widowhood to prayer in the Temple." This was the seal compelling Jesus to make a whip of cords and drive out animal sellers and moneychangers, exclaiming for all to hear, that these actions profaned the sanctuary with idols and thievery.

These actions, these transactions had been occurring outside the temple for years yet today they would be seen with new eyes. "Stop making my father's house into

a marketplace!" we hear Jesus exclaims as he moved throughout the area turning the order upside down. Confused and disoriented the Jewish people asked for a sign. A sign, bold and brilliant **stood before them**. Jesus declares – if the temple was destroyed he could raise it up in three days. His words taken literally only confused them more. What they could not understand – Jesus stood before them as the **new** holy temple. His work had begun to teach that God's kingdom was among all gathered around him. God's presence in the world would not be focused on a place but rather a person.

Jesus entered the temple and redirected its focus. In doing so he reminded all present of why they gathered – to celebrate the day of Passover.

It doesn't take much to look around and see promise of spring. Before our eyes the world is being made new. For many, this is a time when we clean and reorder our own homes and lives. How timely for us to hear this gospel this morning. My preferred tool is a broom rather than a whip, but the goal could be the same. The goal – to clear out the things that clutter our lives and our souls. This is the focus of Lent. A time when God can get our attention, to remove those things that disorder and hinder the work we are called to do, the sacrifice we are called to make.

In preparation, it did not take long for me to see why our lectionary might choose this Sunday to read both the story of the 10 Commandments and this story of the temple cleansing. In Lent, we find ourselves in a time of redirection, a time to focus on our need to stay alert. God reveals how we live as God's beloved and faithful stewards. The commandments tell us clearly how we live a life of faith. Jesus teaches this as well. We recall this teaching in the Penitential Order in our Prayer Book, so appropriate for Lent:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

We enter this place knowing it is sacred not because of the bricks and mortar, of the altar and appointments, of the liturgy, the music or the preaching – we know it is sacred because we gather here, young and old, beloved of God. We gather here, called to be God's holy temple. Renewed by this truth, go out to manifest God's presence everywhere as we seek justice, peace, respect, understanding and love for all.

May we continue to pray through this holy Lent, that our attention be focused on God, where we will hear of the holy, see the sacred and live with the same consuming zeal, caring for one another and the world.