

EXODUS 20:1-17 (p. 60)

MARCH 4, 2018

JOHN 2:13-22 (p. 861)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord! Open up your Word to us—and us, to your Word. Make the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts pleasing in your sight this morning, so that together we might move one step closer to you. And fill us with your Holy Spirit, please, causing us to fill the world with your Glory. For we ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

“A DEN OF THIEVES”

Deb and I have been De-Junking our house! Well, actually, she is doing a far better job at it than I am. But we are on a mission, a three-fold mission; Put Away, Give Away, or Throw Away! It's like Spring Cleaning on Steroids! I've even thought about getting one those great big dumpsters, and just filling it up! You might say I have Dumpster Fever! I mean, every now and then you just need to clean house, right!

Think about all of the junk that you could throw in a dumpster! I could toss in all those pieces of scrap wood that I've been saving, “just in case”. And all that extra wire! I could get rid of that mountain of paint cans—the ones with a quarter inch of paint left—that we've been saving in case anything ever needs to be touched up! I could include all those chairs that Deb is going to recover! I could throw out all of the kid's stuff that is still stored at the house! I could even get rid of those bicycles that have been hanging on the garage wall ever since we first moved in!

No, on second thought, those might be antiques by now! But just think, I could toss out everything, and just start over!

That's one caution with Dumpster Fever; it's pretty easy to go overboard. Which may be why I haven't gotten one yet? But every now and then you do need to de-junk, right. Our homes, and our lives, tend to get cluttered. Periodically, we need to go through them and reclaim space. Houses weren't designed to be repositories of junk, or waste accumulation facilities, or trash museums! And neither are our lives. Every now and then you just need to clean house! Lent, by-the-way, is a great time to do that with our spiritual lives. And the nail that we are carrying this year is a visual reminder of "why"!

That's what Jesus is doing in our Gospel lesson, cleaning house. He is not washing the walls or scrubbing the floors. But He is sweeping out the filth. He is not cleaning windows, per se. But He is trying help people see a little more clearly. You know the story, I'm sure. Filled with passion, Jesus flips over the tables of the money changers! But do you know the background, and therefore, the reason for His anger?

The Lord, and His Disciples, have gone up to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival, the single biggest event in Jewish life and history. It's the annual celebration of the Exodus, Israel's release from captivity, by Almighty God Himself! Passover is like Easter, or Christmas, for the Israelites. It's a huge Holy time! They celebrated it while they were still wandering in the wilderness. And each year thereafter, after entering the Promised Land!

Scripture talks about Passover celebrations during the days of King Hezekiah, and King Josiah, and when the faithful returned from the Babylonian captivity! Passover is the single most continuously celebrated Holy Day in any religion, period, dating back over thirty-five hundred years! It is the most widely celebrated High Holy Day in the entire Jewish year! Scholars say this one Feast is the “single strongest cohesive force in the entire fabric of Jewish community and culture!” It is so important, in fact, that both Numbers and Chronicles give alternative dates to Worship, in case, on Passover, one finds them self ceremonially “unclean”, and therefore unable to stand before God! Imagine having a Monday morning service for those whose hearts weren’t prepared on Easter morning?

Jesus and His disciples are doing what they are supposed to do, what’s prescribed in God’s Law. They have traveled from Galilee in the north, up to the Holy City of God. They have come to the Temple, the House of the Lord, the place where God has promised His Shekinah Glory would reside! And they have done this as obedient Jews, to honor God, to celebrate the Exodus, the defining event for God’s Chosen People!

The Lord led them away from the pyramids of Egypt, past a death sentence for all first-born. He used a baby floating in a river, and eventually a burning bush. Jewish slaves won out against Pharaoh’s mighty army! A goat herder named Moses bested Egyptian sorcerers. Divine plagues, the parting of a sea, and the birth of a nation at the foot of a thundering mountain called Sinai, remember!

This was all part of the Exodus experience! As was the giving of the Law, the rules that God ordained His people to live by! Passover is the very beginning of this life-changing drama! It's no wonder that it is the foundational Feast on which all other religious celebrations are based! Just look at how it is celebrated!

The Passover begins with every household carrying out a thorough, ceremonial house cleaning! Cooking utensils and serving trays all have to be washed, in very specific ways! Hands have to be cleaned, again in special ways. And the homes of the faithful have to be rid of all yeast, leavening, a symbolic substance that represents sin! Do you see any Christian parallels? Maybe repentance and baptism?

When that was done, each family had to select a lamb for themselves, one out of the flock, one without blemish of course, and take it home with them to be their own. It had to be a year-old lamb, so an adult, but still quite young. They then had to keep this lamb with them as part of the family for three days, almost like a pet, so that it moved from "a lamb" to "our lamb" in their hearts. Afterwards, on the fourth day, they had to kill it together as a community. And then, share it together as a family meal! Does any of that symbolism sound familiar to you?

If you lived on a farm, not too far from Jerusalem, rounding up a lamb and bringing it into the city wasn't a big deal. However, if you didn't happen to raise sheep, or if you lived quite a-ways away, then the only way in which you could fulfill your religious duty was to come to town with money and buy an animal to be sacrifice once you were there.

And if you happen to live in a foreign country, which tens of thousands of pilgrims to Jerusalem did, then the only way for you to buy your lamb, let alone pay your half-shekel Temple tax, was to first convert your money into the local currency! You can see why a group of enterprising entrepreneurs might set up currency-exchange booths, just like at airports today. And you can envision, I'm sure, how local farmers would see this as a great time for selling young sheep. You can even see why those who ran the Temple might want these "Worship Helps" close at hand, right! And how they might take a percentage of each transaction for things like rent!

However, by the time of Jesus, the entire system had become corrupt! Historians tell us that the Temple Priests had actually moved the whole Currency Exchange program right into the Temple Courts! It'd be like having an ATM's in the church lobby, or toll booths for your tithe! Picture a crooked State Fair, with all of the sights and smells! Imagine a dishonest Yard Sale, or shady Farmer's Market, right there in your House of Worship, right there in the back of the sanctuary? How would that feel as you came to Worship?

You can see why Jesus might want to clean house, can't you? You can see why He accuses the religious leaders of turning His Father's House into a Market Place, into a Den of Thieves! The whole point of Worship is to Worship, isn't it—to give Glory to the One True God! And the whole point of the Temple, or this sanctuary, is to create an environment that orients us in God's direction!

The purpose of all the traditions, all the rituals, even the Law itself—the purpose of the Church, and of the People of God, is to make ourselves and others God-aware! We come to the House of God to Worship—to Praise His Name and glorify His work in the world—and to help others see this, and seek Him out themselves! The Temple is where God has promised to meet with His people, and to remain with His people, and yet what Jesus finds is a bunch of cattle, and goats, and thieves, blocking the way!

The problem that Jesus had with the moneychangers, is actually the same problem He had with the Scribes and Pharisees. It's the same problem that He has with the churches in Revelation, the same problem that He often has with us. In fact, it's the same problem God had with the Hebrew people at the foot of Mt. Sinai—which is why He gave us the Law in the first place! The problem, apparently, our problem, is focus! As narcissistic, sinful human beings, we have a tendency to get in the way! I mean, just look at the Top Ten Commandments from our first reading, because focus is exactly what they deal with!

“You shall have no other God's before me.” “You shall not make for yourselves any idols or worship them.” “You shall not misuse My name.” “And you shall remember the Sabbath and keep it Holy.” It's God first, and foremost! There is no complicated nuance here! These Laws are all pretty straight forward. They all focus our attention on God! It's the same thing that Jesus said when He was asked to sum up the Law. He said the Greatest Commandment is to Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind!

Jesus then went on to say that the Second Greatest Commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. Those are the next six that God gave to Moses. “Honor your father and mother.” “Don’t murder.” “Don’t commit adultery.” “Don’t steal.” “Don’t lie.” And “don’t covet what doesn’t belong to you.” It’s all rather simple when you think about it. It’s not an exhaustive list, of course, or all-encompassing. It was never intended to be! If you try, I’m sure you can think of more to add in! The point though, is pretty clear! We need to orient ourselves away from ourselves, away from the world, and turn our focus towards God!

That’s the point of the Temple too, and of Worship in the Temple. That’s the point of the Passover Feast, and of all the other High Holy days. That’s the reason God called a People unto Himself, the reason Jesus called together the Church! You can see why Jesus got so upset that day, can’t you! That focus had made a dramatic shift!

That’s the history part! Now we need to bridge that to today! So, what about us? How are we, in the church, missing the point? And what can we do to change that? Where are our money-changing tables that are blocking people from experiencing Worship? Is it too noisy in the bizarre to focus on prayer? Are the sights and smells distracting? Are we more worried about the business of church, rather than the business of God? Are we zeroed-in on accommodating the needs of pilgrims, while leaving out the needs of God? Do we worry too much about paying the Temple tax, or at least talk too much about paying the Temple tax!

Those are good questions, aren't they? What is it that we do here, in the Temple, to hamper our Worship of the Lord? Think about it for a moment, because I am going to ratchet it up some. I'm going to bring it closer to home, you know, make it personal?

Scripture, in several places, says things like 1 Corinthians 3:16; "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's Temple, and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?" So, what is going on inside your temple, in your life, that is shifting the focus away from God? What hampers you from approaching God? What's in the way, that needs to be cleaned out? What kind of worldly exchange tables are blocking your access to the Presence of God? Did you come for the party, or to Worship? Have you made God into a commodity, one to be sold at bargain prices? Is there a table or two in your life, covered with selfishness or greed or sin, that Jesus may need to turn over? Think hard!

You are the Body of Christ! That means that if the present world is ever going to know Christ, then they are going to have to learn of Christ through your witnesses. That's kind of daunting, I know! But it's true! Lent, like spring, is a great time for some house cleaning, or maybe even Dumpster Fever! Remember, though, you don't burn down the house just because it gets filled with junk. Instead, you start cleaning. You get rid of the junk. You redeem your Temple. You take out your broom and sweep away what doesn't belong. You remove the yeast from every corner of your home, the sin that permeates so many areas of your life! You prepare God's Temple, so that when the Bridegroom comes, it's ready. And so those who see it, until then, can't help but say, "Surely the Lord is in this place!" And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord, we stand humbly before you. Some of us have come on bended knee, and with broken hearts. And some have come with troubles beyond what we can bear. Some of us are thirsting this morning Lord, and you are the font of life from which we would drink.

Our world is filled with so many hurts right now. Wars rage around us. Lives are lost. People are put in harms way. Love of neighbor is not what we see! And we are at a loss, Lord, for how to make it better. So, we ask you to heal our world. Please pour out peace, Father, as well as love and acceptance. Please shower us with Grace, Grace beyond all human understanding. Please give to the leaders of this world wisdom, and knowledge, and understanding—orienting each one of them, and each person on this planet, towards you.

Heal us Lord, in this time of prayer. Calm our swirling minds, for they are so often full of unrest. Still our worried hearts, Lord, and relieve the stress that courses through our veins. Turmoil seems to be everywhere, and compassion hidden away. So please Father, set things right. Heal the wounds, the bodies, the minds, and the spirits, as well as the hearts of all who call on you.

This morning we ask you to please be especially with Please be with the men and women who are serving our nation, and their families. Please be with all those who lead in every nation, and in every place and time, so that they might find your peace and your guidance. And please, make us a people who do the same, who encourage and help and build, who do not tear down. We ask these things, Lord, in Jesus' Name, as we pray together now the very prayer that he has taught us saying, Our Father...