

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Lent 3B
March 3, 2024
John 2:13-22 (23-25)

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking about the temple of his body. (John 2:18-21 ESV)

In the Name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world.

When God delivered His people from slavery in Egypt, His glory appeared to them at the tent of meeting as a pillar of cloud by day or of fire by night. The people dared not approach such glory for fear of being destroyed. So God gave them the sacrificial system so they would not approach without the shedding of blood for sin. When Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, God's glory dwelt there. Indeed, God had declared, "I have consecrated this temple, which you have built, by putting my Name there forever. My eyes and My heart will always be there." (1 Kings 9:3). That Temple was to be the place where the people would come into the very presence of God. It was to be a place of prayer and of sacrifice for sin. It was to be a place where God would bless His people.

Yet, it was only a foreshadowing of a greater Temple yet to come. For temples made with hands inevitably fall, and when Solomon's temple fell, Zerubbabel built another. That one, like the first, could not last, and Herod rebuilt a third, a building that required 46 years of labor and it still wasn't done. Yet even that temple could not last. A better, indestructible temple was necessary. A temple for the eternal and unchanging God must be a temple established by God Himself; one that, even after it is destroyed would rise again in only three days (John 2:19). And when Jesus spoke such scandalous words in the temple courts, He was speaking of the temple of His body (John 2:21).

So here is Jesus, in the Temple courts, probably the court of the Gentiles, filled with the noise of a marketplace. Pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover couldn't very well bring all of the animals necessary for the various sacrifices that were required. So they would bring their money, buy the bulls, lambs, or pigeons, then offer them on the altar. The money changers would exchange foreign money for proper Jewish money, often at high exchange rates. Yes, the Temple had become a full-service church. All that was needed was some cash.

But such was not to be. God's house of prayer and forgiveness had been turned into a house of Mammon. They had replaced the true worship of God with idolatry and greed. Business and sacrifice became more important than meeting with God Himself. And we do the same thing when we build that which blocks or distracts from God's presence among us and our receiving His gifts. When we erect our own idols in His house thinking them more important than being in His presence and receiving from Him the fullness of His grace and mercy.

When Jesus sees this outrageous desecration of His Father's house, He does something about it. He makes a whip and drives "them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen," (John 2:15), declaring that the merchants and moneychangers had turned His Father's house into a market, or emporium. (John 2:16). There was no place for them there, for they had turned those quiet precincts of prayer and meditation into a cacophonous madhouse. But even worse, by selling their products and making their profits from the pious faithful who had come to worship, they had given the impression that the things of God are a marketable product, to be bartered and negotiated for the best price. It is almost an understatement for the disciples to remember the words of the prophet, "Zeal for Your house will consume Me" (John 2:17).

But the Maker of heaven and earth is in little need of defense, dear friends. St. John has also made abundantly clear that Jesus does not merely concern Himself with decorum and propriety of worship. Jesus had gone up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast. Thus He removed the leaven of men's business. He thus anticipates the last and greatest Maundy Thursday Passover festival, the one that would fulfill all Passovers. It is almost as if He cannot wait for His own Passover work to begin. Today He strips all money from these courts, emphasizing that there is no gold, no silver, no offering that can be made in payment for what God Himself is about to give. For you know "that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot." (1 Peter 1:18-19). After making His whip, Jesus cleanses the temple of the sacrificial offerings themselves. In so doing He anticipates His own sacrificial offering, the offering of His own flesh and blood for the sake of the world. He is the High Priest, but "He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself." (Heb. 7:27).

But Jesus is not merely the sacrificial offering. The Jews demanded of Him, "'What sign do you show us for doing these things?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking about the temple of his body." (John 2:18-21).

As St. Paul wrote, "Jews demand signs . . . but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews. . ." (1 Cor. 1:22-23). They had rejected all the signs Jesus had done and would still

do. They hardened their hearts against God and His Anointed. They had lost sight of the God “who [had] brought [them] out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” (Ex. 20:2). Greed and profit overshadowed the presence of God and His glory. They demanded a sign. And Jesus gave them one.

Herod's magnificent building was only that - a magnificent building, a temple made with human hands, a future ruin. Thus, when Jesus says “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” He uses the word for the part of the temple where God dwelt, the Holy of holies. Yet now, God resides in the humanity of Mary's Son, and at His death the temple veil was torn in two (Mark 15:37). And true to His Word, the third day after they killed Him, He rose from the dead. The holy of holies no longer hides within the deepest confines of those stone-cut courts, but the holy of holies now walks among men and talks to men and heals men of their diseases and banishes the demons from them. He is the sacrifice, He is the priest, He is the temple. This is an amazing picture that St. John would have us see here, for he portrays Jesus as the one who fully embodies everything that once expressed the hope and desire of antiquity, and He now dwells among us who gather to worship Him.

Yes, my friends, Christ calls Himself a temple, and so He is. For in Him, in His own person, “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,” as St. Paul tells us (Col. 2:9). And if anyone now seeks God apart from Christ, he should be warned that God will not be found. “For . . . without Christ there is no God. All those who seek God elsewhere than in Christ - [whether in Jerusalem or in Mecca or in any other place, including one's heart] - they will find no God and will perish” (Luther). But here there is great comfort for us, who are the worshipers of Christ. For we know that by His mercy, we shall not be driven away from His holy presence.

Yes, the Temple of God is not a building, but a Person. God grant that we rejoice in Christ Who forgives all our sins and Who will raise us to live with Him forever. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

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