

Sermon Lent III Year B 2018

Exodus 20:1-12

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22

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Our Lenten journey is now in its third week. Two weeks ago, on the first Sunday of Lent we began with the Great Litany and the gospel lesson focused on the story of Jesus' temptation in the Wilderness. Last Sunday, we heard Jesus tell us to take up our cross and follow him. We reflected upon how God has a way of interrupting our plans in calling us to follow him.

This morning's lessons now call our attention to worship and relationship. In the OT lesson from Exodus, we heard God declare the 10 best ways to live, the Ten Commandments. These speak of how the Hebrew people were to relate to God and to one another. Faithful living and worship had clear expectations.

For the Hebrew people, the life of faith involved faithful observance of the Jewish festivals. The major festival of Passover called believers to Jerusalem for worship at the Temple. So too, for Christians following the Lectionary, the journey of Lent is the inexorable journey to Jerusalem. We know where this forty day journey leads. Lent will take us to Holy Week when the evil of this world will pass judgment on Jesus of Nazareth, the divine Son of God. The corrupt holders of political and religious authority will inflict society's ultimate punishment, death on a cross. Journeying through the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke we know that Jerusalem is the destination of Jesus' ministry. At the end of each gospel Jesus arrives in Jerusalem at Passover and enters the temple.

But wait a minute. We are not reading from Mark's gospel even though this year we usually draw our lessons from Mark's gospel. This is one of those Sunday's where the lesson is from the Gospel of John. In John's gospel, Jesus observes Passover at the Temple several times. This is the first such visit and we are only in the second chapter.

John wants us to see this conflict, this dramatic contrast between Jesus and those who held religious authority not as something that slowly rose to a crescendo over the course of Jesus' three year ministry. No, this conflict was present from the get go. Jesus, his mission and ministry, were misunderstood from the very beginning.

This conflict with religious authority didn't begin as Jesus rode into town on a donkey on Palm Sunday. No, the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth brought conflict with those in authority early in his ministry. Things didn't just go wrong at the very end. The project didn't just go off track with one or two wrong turns, the whole of Jesus' ministry put him in conflict with those who stubbornly stuck to the law as they had received it and could not appreciate it being reinterpreted in their midst. Looking back we can see a pattern of the authorities questioning Jesus and the disciples at every turn. "Why do your servants not fast? Why do your servants pick corn on the Sabbath? Why do you heal or cast out demons on the Sabbath? Why do you eat with outcasts and sinners?" On and on the complaints echoed from a corrupt religious authority that clung to power and depended upon a system that was self-preserving at the expense of the real faith and worship of the people of God. Jesus was a challenge to religious authority all along.

The great Jewish festivals played an orienting role in the lives of the people of Israel. No festival was more central to their faith than the Feast of Passover.

This annual festival recalled the central theme, the Exodus experience. The story of Moses leading the Jewish people out of captivity in Egypt into the land of promise was how the Ten Commandments began. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:1) That lesson went on to detail the Ten Commandments, the core of Jewish faith.

The Exodus theme is not limited to the passage out of Egypt a thousand years or so earlier. This theme echoes throughout the Hebrew Bible; over and over God moves to restore his beloved people. Whenever they found themselves in captivity, they looked to God for freedom and release. So too in Jesus’ day, they were looking for God to bring freedom from the Roman occupiers. They looked to God in hope.

So each and every year the faithful journeyed to Jerusalem at Passover. Israelites would come from all over to gather for the sacred meal and to enter the Temple and offer a sacrifice of atonement. This sacrifice would cleanse them from sin, restore them to worship, and renew their faith.

To sacrifice at the Temple required some negotiating. Upon arriving in the Temple precincts, money had to be exchanged for temple currency (in order to make a purchase). Roman coinage with pagan images had to be exchanged for Palestinian shekels for purchases and to pay the required Temple tax. So there were not only scads of animal vendors, but money changers as well. And who knows what other vendors, a Passover medallion perhaps or special pottery vessels commemorating the occasion? It must have resembled the ultimate flea market. This was the cacophonous scene that the faithful had to forge their way through.

Jesus entered this sacred center of the Jewish faith against this backdrop of commotion and activity. Jesus was appalled. The prophetic vision of the Temple as stated in Is. 56:6-8 was to have been a gathering place and house of prayer for all nations. The sight was overwhelming and Jesus reacted. Jesus turned over the tables of the money changers and drove the animals and their vendors out. Scripture describes a violent confrontation.

Inevitably a disagreement with those in authority resulted. “What sign can you show us for doing this? Jesus responded, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” What an incredulous statement since this, the third temple, had been under construction for 46 years.

John in his gospel wants to be clear that Jesus takes up his cross from the very beginning of his ministry. His mission is a new way of being. From the outset, the religious authorities were unable to recognize the true temple in their midst. Jesus embodied the mystical presence of God, the new Temple.

So too today, Jesus continues with us, concerned for those whom Jesus has always been concerned with. So, if Jesus is continuing to overturn the tables of those who are taking advantage of others, what might that look like? The great economic disparity in our culture suggests that there are lots of options for Jesus’ concern and intervention. Jesus was active in healing, how would he feel about people not having access to health care? How would he feel about the payday lenders that Congress can’t seem to muster courage to regulate? Would Jesus be on the side of regulation and protections offered by government or do you think he would be tearing down regulations that protect people from abuse? How would Jesus feel about those who plunder and destroy God’s beloved creation without regard for those who come after them?

If Jesus would be concerned about these situations and conditions, we should be concerned as well. In our personal lives we need to be making decisions from the perspective of a disciple of Jesus.

Here at St. John's, I believe we are responding as Jesus would have us respond. As the church we are addressing the needs of the community around us. You assist children in learning and growing so that they too may succeed in life, through the Day School or tutoring programs at Linkhorne Elementary School or at the Yoder Center in Tinbridge Hill. You have offered food to the hungry through the RAEFP, the Gateway, Meals on Wheels, Lynchburg Grows, Daily Bread, the Linkhorne Elementary Backpacks weekend feeding program, and the special distribution of 26,000 meals shared with the community just last month. You assist people with housing, through your work volunteering with Habitat for Humanity or with the IOA's Interfaith Rebuilds or the Ramp Ministry. You support the health, well-being, and healing of this community by hosting 15 twelve-step programs per week at the AA house and by serving as the site for twice monthly Kid's Haven dinners and group meetings.

During this Lenten season, Jesus calls us to repentance, to turn our lives around. We turn our lives to face Jesus who leads us into a new future. This future we call the reign of God. Jesus inaugurated this in-breaking reign of God, also known as the kingdom of God. And God's kingdom is continuing to be revealed. It is revealed as we faithfully follow Jesus in our life and worship. We don't know where this will lead but we trust that Jesus accompanies us always. In faith, we follow Jesus who is with us and his mission continues through our hands stretched out for the life of the world around us.