

Third Sunday in Lent, Year B
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
March 7, 2021

The Gospel story this morning is one of the better action scenes in all of scripture. After the Passion and the Nativity, Jesus turning over the tables in the temple probably places third in the most captivating story contest. Imagine an enormous open air courtyard intended for worship being transformed into kind of an outdoor mall, with merchants selling goods of all kinds, haggling over prices, and even allowing their livestock to go to auction in the space that had been reserved by their ancestors as a place for God to live. Jesus was furious and started screaming and throwing over tables as a way to disrupt commerce. In one of the other gospels, this same story comes up, and Jesus actually brandishes a whip and starts to drive the merchants out.

There are some pretty standard interpretations: the importance of sacred space being set aside of worship and for God, the keeping of Sabbath and the necessary protection of our holy hours with God, even some more economic interpretations about the ways in which the temple money changers were gouging the poor worshippers — kind of like you might imagine payday loan folks charging exorbitant interest to people who are already poor. Imagine if a shady bank started offering subprime mortgages from the steps of St. Mark's, and you might get an idea of why Jesus was so upset in this Gospel.

Most years, when this story comes up, I find myself quick to make a reference to our holy space — the way in which we can understand the anger felt at the defiling of the temple if we only imagine what it would be like to have our own space defiled in the same way.

Here is the strange catch for us in this particular year: we have not worshiped in person in our own temple for over a year now. We are effectively in exile from the Father's house, to use Jesus' words. There could be people setting up shop in there right now selling all kinds of things, and I wouldn't know, because I am seeing you virtually this morning. What kind of resonance does this story have for a people who are currently not in the temple?

Bear with me, this is going to be kind of a windy road here for a minute. A little history lesson: the temple in Jerusalem was the economic and religious center of life for the ancient nation of Israel. It was destroyed twice, once six hundred years before the birth of Christ by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon during the sacking of Jerusalem, and once forty years after the death of Christ by the Romans as a retaliation after a Jewish uprising to throw off Roman occupation. In both cases, the conquerors knew that the way to dishearten the people was to, well, cut out their heart — destroy the center of their lives, the temple.

To complicate this story, Jesus is doing his ministry before the temple is destroyed by the Romans, but the people who are writing down his story are writing after the Roman devastation. So, when they are writing about Jesus in the temple, they are doing their best to put one of their memories down on paper. Imagine coming and seeing St. Mark's just a lump of rocks and trying quickly to write down all the memories you can remember from having lived and worshiped in that space.

Each time the temple is destroyed, the people of God have an opportunity to learn a lesson. When the temple is destroyed in 600 BCE, the Jewish people lean more heavily on the rituals of the Sabbath that can be completed in the home — the prayers, the study of Torah, the time with family. When the

temple was destroyed again in 70 CE, the earliest followers of Jesus also went through a transformation. They began to see the resurrection of Jesus as a kind of rebuilding of the temple that had been destroyed. Where one God lived inside stone walls, now God lived in a living, breathing human just like you and just like me. Our connection to God no longer relied on being able to be in a certain place at a certain time; instead, our connection to God was based entirely on our connection to one another, to the Eucharist, to the poor, and even to the waters of baptism. Every piece of bread became a possible vehicle of God. Every puddle could be the site of a transformative baptism.

History lesson over. I bring all this up merely to remind us that being kept out of our places of worship is nothing new for the people of God. We have been through it, and we have been through it more than once.

So, what lesson are we going to learn this time? What ways is God whispering to us?

I only hear this faintly at the moment, but I wonder if we are being called to remember that we can talk to God in our homes. I wonder if we are being called to remember that every one of us is a disciple of Jesus, not just the priest with his fancy clothes and proximity to the altar. I wonder if we are being called to remember that traditional worship is one way that we access the divine but that there are others. I wonder if we are being called to return to worship when it is safe but not forget the lessons we have learned from ways of being together online.

Jesus was furious in the story today because he saw people defiling the house of God. And of course that would be today true today as well. But I wonder if what we are learning in COVID times is that the places sacred to God are more numerous than we thought. If it is not pleasing to God for the church to be used as a place to take advantage of people financially, then maybe it's not pleasing to God for that to happen anywhere. If it is not pleasing to God for people to forget their allegiance to God almighty in their quest for fame, position or power in the temple courtyard, maybe it's not pleasing to God for that to happen anywhere.

COVID is teaching us, and I think the history of the temple in Jerusalem confirms it, that God is more places than we thought. God's justice is required in more places than we thought. And that God's people are called to their religious duties in more places than we thought.

The good news is that God is showing God's grace everywhere — not just at St. Mark's altar, but in this strange zoom worship that we do until we are allowed back in the building. But the good news has an asterisk to it: just as the grace of God is everywhere, so is our responsibility to God's people. If the grace exists outside the temple, then so does our commitment to justice, to peace, and to the commonwealth of God's reign on earth.

So, yes, my friends. Our temple is a special place. It is also not the only place that God shows up. And maybe, just like our ancestors in Jerusalem, this is a time for us to learn that lesson again for our own generation. Amen.