

John 2:13-22
Third Sunday in Lent
March 3, 2024

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, our Gospel reading, in which we hear these words, “And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, ‘Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.’ His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

All our text’s focus and energy is on the temple, isn’t it? – that unique and central place of God’s Old Covenant dealing with man. That place King David desired to build, God assigned Solomon to build, the Babylonians destroyed, the exiles rebuilt, the rebuilders wept over because the second was not as impressive as the first, and yet – as Jesus’ disciples point out during Holy Week, what an awesome structure – stones lined with gold, an architectural wonder (especially after the second temple was renovated and expanded by Herod)... truly illustrative of the title ‘the house of God.’ ... the place of holiness.

Our text certainly focuses on this temple and asks us to consider Jesus in relation to it (in fact, our text is taken from John 2... but the temple cleansing happened early in Holy Week! John

moved the event to the front of his *non-chronological*, doctrinally-driven text, obviously intent on us seeing the relationship between Jesus and the temple). And, on the one hand, we could see this as Jesus replacing the old with the new, as our communion hymn rightly confesses: “No temple now, no gift of price, no priestly round of sacrifice, retain their ancient pow’rs.” Yes, those priestly rounds of sacrifice (as we’ve recently touched on in Bible Study) are now over; that chief purpose of the temple is now emptied of its use. No longer do we live in need of the house that Solomon (or more properly, Herod) built.

On the other hand, Jesus wouldn’t display such righteous fury if the temple was simply outdated. The disciples would have no reason to remember that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me” if Jesus was simply seeking to do away with the temple in a few days anyway – who is zealous over, consumed in zeal by, that which he is about to discard?

Jesus doesn’t say he came to replace the temple, but to cleanse it, fulfill it, defend it and rebuild it... rebuild not the *stone* temple, the *stone* house of God, but ‘rebuild’ and resurrect His own body. (Yes, we know, *there* is the connection Jesus himself makes – “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” ... and John says, “He was speaking about the temple of his body.”)

We often make that connection pointing **forward**: the temple giving way to Jesus... him supposedly not caring about the destruction of the temple, because His body will be raised in three days. But we almost always fail to make the connection (in a sense) pointing **backward**... that Jesus is the fulfillment of the temple, and, thus: Is not the desecration of the temple indication of how sinners view their God and Christ? Consider that: despite the shift in attention to Christ's own body, there remains the attention (in today's readings, and in Jesus' ministry teachings) on holiness, the Ten Commandments, the fear of God – the things formerly associated with *the temple*.

Yes, if the temple is fulfilled in Christ's body, and if his body bears the holiness of God, then our abuse of and disdain for that holiness, for those ten commandments, for the fear of God... that, too, is a desecration of His body - that body that carries in itself the holy will of God: "A body you have given me," the Christ says, "I have come to do your will"... and yet the crowds (in a sense) desecrated *it* by desecrating the temple. How does Jesus say it: "Destroy this temple" (Is he not *here also* – not just in the end of the comment – but *here also* speaking of His body?) – "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again."

And, just as readily as he said it to them regarding their view of the temple, could he not say it to us regarding our view of

the Holy Law. That, when we breeze past, tear down, and destroy those Ten Commandments, believing them irrelevant to our daily life, not living in them but believing our unholy living and half-hearted offerings will be acceptable in God's sight, forgetting those Ten Commandments are for the whole creation and teach us faith in God and fervent love for one another... when we tear that all down in daily life, such is equally the desecration of the holiness of God, we might say the holy temple of God, so that that holy body of Jesus had to go to the cross for us as well – and in raising up Himself, raising up also our love and adoration of His *holiness*.

Yes, for us as well, Jesus goes to the cross, that he might not only clear unholiness from destroying the holy things of God, but that He may also fulfill all righteousness and holiness.

In fact, we can talk all we want about the greediness of money-changers and the materialism with which the Jews had turned God's house into a house of trade (Jesus himself condemns that), but, doesn't our text also highlight the presence of all those Old Testament holy rituals and sacrificial offerings – oxen, sheep, pigeons... that, here, as Jesus goes to the cross, He does so to fulfill once for all what could not be done by the oxen and sheep and pigeons that garnered so much attention as sacrifice for holiness.

So many sinners had *not* turned from all the blood of goats and sheep to the one Lamb of God who was taking upon himself the sin of the whole world, meaning *their* sin, too. How many were still hoping in the blood and meritorious sacrifice of oxen and sheep and pigeons, when all the offerings – burnt offering, sin offering, guilt offering, peace offering, grain offering – they were all being met and fulfilled and brought to termination in the one who was standing before them.

And so, Jesus observes it all before him in the house of his Father. He will clear away the unclean and unholy and all that still hopes in the Old, and substitute for it that which is pure and holy, His own ‘Lamb of God’ body.

But each action in its own order. First, He clears it all, not as protestor, but as Lord and judge of His temple. Sometimes, we forget that, don’t we? We think that Jesus was cleansing the temple as a protestor, as someone who is dissatisfied with the higher authority and thus lashing out to get that seemingly deaf higher authority’s attention (in fact, a few years ago, certain groups even compared the January 6 chaos at the Capitol to Jesus cleansing of the temple! What a horrible comparison, if for no other reason than because Jesus is no citizen, subject or servant of the temple... no protestor (who, by definition, always protests against higher authorities)... that’s not Jesus. Jesus is Lord and

judge of the temple of Old *and* Lord and judge of His body, and thus, he must first clear out that which is corrupt – clear it out of the temple, of the world, of every corner of sin’s darkness... and then, even as the corruptors seek to destroy him, He will willingly give His body – not ‘helplessly be destroyed’, but *willingly* substitute His holiness – and will rise again in three days, having fulfilled all God’s holiness and having atoned for all sins in a manner the temple never could, but in a way His own flesh and blood fully provided once for all.

Meditate upon the richness of Christ’s perfect and holy sacrifice: as we said, the temple had a unique and central place in God’s dealing with man: from David to Solomon to the Exiles returned, until God in his judgment left the temple (as described in Ezekiel’s prophecy)... left it a barren and empty structure, nothing more than a human architectural feat. But, for *it* (in other words, for all it represented of God’s dealing with man) Christ returned God’s presence to the temple, so that holiness, hope, salvation, and life might return... And that’s exactly what Christ achieved for *all* which that temple represents. In Christ’s perfect sacrifice the temple had meaning again – not as if the building was again important, but how it once promised God’s relationship with man – *that* was again important – indeed fulfilled! – the certainty of God’s present dwelling with man was concrete,

rekindled anew and forever, by the perfect offering made to God in that holy body of Christ Jesus... that all who seek forgiveness may find it in the true and lasting temple built by Christ Jesus, filled with Word and Sacrament, continually pouring out forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Now, *you* have been baptized into Christ's death. *You* have been joined by baptism into all that Christ has accomplished. More than that, you have been joined *to* Christ: "All of you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ," Paul says. And, if you have put on – or, you have been clothed – in Christ, then you, too, are now the body whose holiness He zealously defends. How does St Paul say it?:

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God (gifted when you were baptized into Christ)? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price, so glorify God in your body."

Suddenly, the Ten Commandments in our Old Testament reading rush back to the fore, don't they? Are our bodies and lives not to be temples of God's holiness? Are they not – having been bound to Christ in baptism and having justified for a clear conscience toward God but also for love of God's holiness... are they not to be sacred keepers of that holy Law, for it is not merely some laundry-list of the Lord's divine demands, but it is the description

of the Lord's own holiness and teaches faith in God and love for neighbor. Yes, here, the holiness of God, is what our Lord had zeal for – “Zeal for your house will consume me” – well, now that house is your body; now, Christ's zeal is to cleanse your temple of all that would desecrate it and disparage God's holiness.

This is a most beautiful thing upon which to meditate; it's a most solemn holiness in which to live; *and* it's a most daunting and sobering reality for us to reflect on in daily life:

Christ has, in holy baptism, made your body, my body, His temple. He is zealous for it, loves it, cherishes it as that place which he dwells and remains to be about His Father's business... and yet, as I look at how I keep it, I see nothing but unholiness, sin, sloth, self-gratification. I have so poorly guarded and honored its holiness; I have so willingly defiled its purity. And what offerings do I have to make it clean and whole and undefiled, as it has been built by Christ to be?

Thus, we sinners have only one hope – that the Christ who died for me will still be zealous for me, and in His zeal for my salvation, He will call me anew to repentance, cleanse my pillars clean of my sin, and declare me holy anew.

Indeed, this is most certainly what He achieved upon the sacrificial altar: To be the substitutionary and atoning death once *for all*... that He may continually apply to you the benefit of His

sacrifice, continually cleanse your temple walls and purify you within, continually – by Word and Sacrament – fill you with His holiness and point you forward to that day in which you are joined to His own vindication, as He said to His enemy and yours:

“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up again.”

Thus, rejoice in living your daily life as His temple – that holy dwelling between God and man, constantly filled with eating of the sacrifice, the forgiveness of sins, and the sacred music that fills the temple walls with His praise. That is the daily life He meant for you, unto eternal life... that is the daily life He won for you, His new covenant temple, when He was zealous not only for His Old Covenant temple, but for its pointing forward to His body and His sacrifice, by which He built the temple of *your* body in the newness of His holy life.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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