

Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York
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The Third Sunday in Lent B ~ March 7, 2021

Exodus 20:1-17, Psalm 19, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: Amen

Why were the people in the temple surprised at Jesus' actions when he drove out the money changers and the sacrificial animals? Although to our minds, this commerce may sound like bizarre activities to be held in a house of worship, they facilitated that worship. The people of Judea made a pilgrimage three times a year to the temple in Jerusalem, including Passover. (Malina, Bruce J. and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 1998) p. 72.)

Once they were there, worshipers were to pay a temple tax and to offer animals for various kinds of sacrifice. In daily commerce, the Judeans used Roman coins that had Caesar's image on them, and bore a legend saying that he was god. If the worshipers had used these coins inside the temple, it would have been blasphemous: both claiming that someone other than YHWH was God, and using a graven image that purported to be god. The money changers exchanged temple currency to use for the tax and offerings worshipers made, instead of using the offensive Roman coins.

And animals that the people were to sacrifice had to be without any imperfection. People traveled, many of them, from a distance, to reach the temple, and animals they brought from home would not reach the temple without imperfection. So, this service by the animal sellers supported the people in their worship and, of course, both services were offered for a fee. They weren't located in the inner part of the temple complex where prayers, teaching or preaching were held; they were in outer courtyards of the large temple complex, which was roughly 1000 feet wide and 1500 feet long. Jesus likely had seen them operating like this since he had started coming on pilgrimages as a boy with his family.

It was understandable, then, that the temple leaders would have questioned Jesus' authority in chasing out the people and animals.

So why was Jesus so affected by their presence? Because his arrival meant that sacrifices were no longer necessary. **His life** was to be the last sacrifice, for the salvation of the people. They no longer had to provide unblemished animals worthy

of receiving God's grace. They would receive God's grace, with the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

And when the temple leaders challenged him and asked what sign he could show for doing this, Jesus replied, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." His flesh and blood were the sign: God's presence was in the temple by virtue of Jesus being there. But neither the leaders nor the common people recognized him as the Messiah and they wouldn't change the way they worshiped.

So, we have had to change the way we worship, not because God has directed us to do so, but to stay safe from coronavirus. People say, "the church has left the building." But the church is the people gathered together, so we don't have to be in the building to be the church.

Some people will take that a step further and complain that with our virtual worship services, "God has left the building." But we also say that God is omnipresent, don't we? That means that God is everywhere. And, since we worship the triune God, and Jesus Christ is among us now as the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit isn't contained in any one building.

How we worship God has been derived from the Ten Commandments. Another name for this formulation is the decalogue, or the "ten words," because the Hebrew in which they were written in the Old Testament is descriptive, not imperative. The words of the Ten Commandments simply describe what life is like when you are the People of God, they don't command us to do or not do anything – that's our English version. A former Pastor of mine, Ed Peterman, said that a far better translation of the commandments would be:

My people don't have other gods before me. My people don't abuse my name. My people take a break one day out of seven. My people honor their parents. My people don't murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, or covet each other's property.

*(Practically Preaching: Who Do You Say I Am? Sermons for Year B * Mark, 2002, p.92.)*

When we envision a movie rendering of Moses receiving the decalogue from God on two huge stone tablets, with Charlton Heston or a similar actor, we lose sight of the relationship God had with the people when God spoke these words. They had just emerged from generations of slavery in Egypt and God was now inviting them into a new way of life. They could worship God freely because they were now free. They

didn't need icons of God to use because they had them: God had created them, themselves, in God's own image.

Having grown out of the Judaic tradition, we live in the same covenant with God. That covenant began with Noah and Abraham, when it was one-sided, all on God's shoulders. But then, when the people of Israel were in the wilderness, God told them through Moses that they were the chosen people – God's own people. And the people said, "Yes, we are your people. Tell us how we should live as your people."

So God told them that they would be "a light to the nations" – an example of holy people for all other people. And part of that example is to see their lives – as we see our lives – described in the Ten Commandments. That same covenant, which is millennia old, still is the basis for our relationship with God.

God doesn't negotiate with us, saying, "If you do this or that, you will be saved." No, God saved us once, for all time, through Jesus the Christ. Some people may say that God is foolish for this gift of God's own self. Paul spoke of this in the first letter to the Corinthians. He said,

The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ... For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

(1 Cor. 1:18, 25)

God loves us so much that God seems to be foolish. And we are fools, in the eyes of the world, for Christ. But we are God's people, living as the gifts God has given us, with the gifts God has given us, in the world God has given us to inhabit. We live in God's grace and bring God's grace into the world.

Let's pray. We thank you for our lives and your life on earth as Jesus Christ. We thank you for the design of life you've given us in your ten words. Help us not to be foolish, because our foolishness is not like yours, expended for the benefit of our full lives on earth, lived in community and empowered to serve the world you have created. In the name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit.

C: Amen.