

3rd Sunday of Lent
Sermon 3.7.21

Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words: 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.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

John 2:13-22

The Passover ... was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!" His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. (519)

The God we meet in the Bible is ambivalent about place, is much more blessing of time. The God we meet in the Bible, the Lord, is less an entity than an occurrence. The Lord is not a thing but an event, an arrival and withdrawal, so this Lord is less involved in place than in time.

Hold that thought.

I don't know why Jesus is so angry here. No one does, not for sure. This event, the so-called cleansing of the Temple, is remembered in all four gospels, so it as good as happened, and is thought important.

How to understand it, though...?

The telling of it: John's feels most severe. All four speak of Jesus having driven people out of the Temple, *driven* them, which is the same word used to speak of the Spirit driving Jesus to the wilderness where he would be tempted by Satan. This driving then: it might suggest not merely an act of internal will but of external force, not a personal decision on Jesus' part but something more like a compulsion. Only in John, though, do we get the means, the actual means of that driving the people and animals out. That whip. That whip of cords, and even Jesus making it.

From there he went on to pour out the coins and overturn the tables. The offense he caused here is so viscerally spelled out. The offense he must have felt here then...

See, John's version of this event not only mentions the "what" of it all, but also gets into the details as to how.

As for the "why," all four ostensibly address that. It seems Jesus objected to the Temple as a marketplace, which he likened elsewhere to a den of robbers and which he's thought here to have objected to because zeal for the house of the Lord consumed him.

The thing is, everything described as happening there was fully sanctioned. Given that it was the time of the Passover, Jerusalem had become crowded with pilgrims. Several hundred thousand more people were in the city than usual. What's more, they were there for a religious festival that required the offering of sacrifice. But pilgrims would have had difficulty bringing their own animals for sacrifice on the long journey to the city from the hinterlands where many of them lived. So, animals were provided there in the courtyards for purchase, doves for those who needed a cheaper choice, lambs for the wealthy as these were the sacrificial animal par excellence. This means moneylenders and changers would also have been useful to have on hand, in case people came with only imperial money to spend, which couldn't be used in the Temple for it having Caesar's head on the coins and the declaration that Caesar was the son of god.

All of this, then, was fully sanctioned. There was actually no way properly to worship at the time of the Passover without all this accrual of goods and rites and monetary exchange.

And it's possible that some people took advantage here. It's possible some moneychangers charged a high fee for their service. It's possible the sheep sold here were sold at a premium. But why shouldn't they be? There was a lot of work in getting those sheep here.

I mean, someone had gone to the trouble of selecting the best of their flock, the worthiest of their animals for the altar. Then, that person had brought those worthy animals here, to the city, to the Temple. That person would have had to bring provisions for those animals, would have had to set aside time to do all this and set up someone to tend the flocks back home in their absence.

All this was a tremendous effort, "value added," as the saying goes now.

It's like how a turkey sandwich sold at Nejaime's an hour prior to gates opening at Tanglewood for James Taylor's concert is going to be a lot more expensive than a turkey sandwich at the Cumberland Farms in Great Barrington late Tuesday afternoon. That's capitalism, baby—and it's about as good a system as we've managed to come up with. Throw in some regulations (make sure that gold coin is actually gold), and a safety net for the vulnerable (don't forget the widow; don't forget the orphan), and I'll be happier with it. But all in all, it's a better system than everyone on their own having to get a dove or two to Jerusalem, a lamb there at the appointed time.

This, I imagine, would actually close more people out of taking part than what we've got going on here. Not everyone can safely travel with a perfect sheep from their flock on a several days' long journey overland where anything could happen. Thieves. Accidents. You don't want your perfect sheep to get blemished now. Or stolen. That is, if you had a perfect sheep to begin with. Or any sheep at all. And traveling with doves? Well, that's a whole other thing.

All of this is to say, Jesus' problem with what was going on here: it seems like it was a bigger issue than what was actually going on here, on this day, at this moment.

What was that Al Pacino movie? "I'm out of order? You're out of order! This whole courtroom is out of order!"

John's gospel does a lot with the concept of *menos*.

This is a Greek word, of course, a word our gospel writer for this morning used as much as the gospel writer of Mark used the word *euthus*, rendered in English "immediately." If Mark was concerned that the gospel of Jesus Christ be felt as an immediate event, then John is concerned

that the gospel of Jesus Christ suggest something about *menos*, which is rendered in English as abide or abode, as dwelling or dwelling-place, as house or home. This is the gospel in which Jesus is remembered to have promised to go ahead to prepare a place for the disciples, and to have claimed that in his Father's house there are many rooms. This is the gospel in which Jesus is said to abide in the Father and the Father to have abided in him.

Abide, abode, dwelling, staying: all this comes down to the Greek term *menos* or *meno*, a term so frequently used you could even say it's fundamental to John's understanding of what Jesus was and is, of who Jesus was and is. The in-dwelling of God, the occurrence of God in the world: the living of Jesus is the abiding of God. And just as a living body is a less a thing than a process, less a state than a dynamic, less a matter of place than a matter of time, so is the in-dwelling of God.

This is the scandal of Jesus' suggesting that his body was a truer temple than the actual Temple. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," he said, which (the text tells us) was him speaking of his body. This was the scandal, that anything could be a truer temple than the Temple.

The thing is, the Temple was itself an add-on to a faith that might well have been complete without it. The Temple was an innovation that came relatively late in the life of this people gathered as a people—a thousand years in, a thousand years to stand, and two thousand years now gone.

First, remember, there was the call to Abraham, a spare word, a bare promise ("You will be the father of many nations.") and a sending forth from his homeland to a new land. It was all simply reckoned to him as faith and righteousness.

Then, there was the call to Moses, a command to go to the captives in Egypt that they might be set free to serve the Lord. This was a slave-class of people who shared not a bloodline but a social station though who would become themselves as an ark of a covenant, a living vessel for the sworn promise of God. They would leave Egypt, cross the Red Sea, and traverse the wilderness for forty years. They would set up camp, here and there, as they went, and eventually Moses would receive from the Lord during a trip up Mount Sinai these Ten Utterances, these ten words or commandments, the barest of things, mere utterances (as the Hebrew suggests), though which served as foundation to the whole Law.

To keep them close, these tablets of the Ten Utterances, the people would build a material ark for carrying them as they went. It would rest in the tent of meeting they'd set up for their

temporary settling in, until eventually they'd take it all down and move on to the next wilderness place.

At last, of course, they would enter the Promised Land, Canaan—this which they conquered from the Canaanites, David the King proving himself over and again in battle until they took the city. It would come to be called as it would come to be, the City of David, also Jerusalem, the city of peace—which makes it a tragic irony that there's hardly another place in the world that has seen so much conflict than this so-called, though much contested, city of peace.

The crowning event for that would be David's retaking the Ark of the Covenant, which had been lost to the Philistines in battle. He would recapture it, bring it to Jerusalem, and set it in its central place—in the Holy of Holies in the tent of meeting, erected again and now to last, tent poles holding up the roof of tanned skins and waxed cloth.

Now, though, if only there were something less temporary than this tent of meeting, than this cloth and hide and tent-pole tabernacle.

Now, if only there were a real stone temple. A millennium into this nomadic faith, now if only they could really know themselves as established—because occupy a place, and you've really arrived. Occupy time, though? Well, what have you really *got*?

It would happen with Solomon, David's son. Once risen to the throne to reign, Solomon would also establish the Temple, a massive structure, indestructible, immovable, eternal. That millennium or so of a light-footed faith was over. Now, now it would be the real deal.

Five hundred years later, though, the Temple was destroyed. Babylon. Destroyed, along with countless lives, spent in defending it, spent in attacking it, spent in conquering and being conquered.

Fifty years later rebuilt, five hundred later it would destroyed again. Rome. Destroyed, along with countless lives, spent in defending it, spent in attacking it, spent in dominating, spent in rebelling.

That was a few decades prior to John's writing this gospel—the gospel written around the year 100, the Temple felled in the year 70. That was a few decades following Jesus sensing it would fall—Jesus speaking of such things around the year 30, and the Temple felled in the year 70.

Meanwhile, though, through it all—from when the Temple was first built in the year, say, 800 to when it was felled in the year 586 to when it was rebuilt and rededicated in the year 536 to when it was felled again in the year 70—there was this other sort of temple. Yes, meanwhile, from the earliest days of the law and its freedoms, there was as ever this temple in time, the Sabbath, the

fourth commandment, the fourth utterance: “For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote of it as beautifully as I think anyone could, but I admit I haven’t done much reading of it myself and I imagine over these three millennia there has been a lot said of it. In a book Heschel wrote in 1951, entitled on point, *The Sabbath*, Heschel evoked, “Technical civilization...is humanity’s triumph over space. Time, however, is beyond our reach, beyond our power. We can overcome distance but can neither recapture the past nor dig out the future. Time is both near and far; time is intrinsic to all experience but transcending all experience. Time is humanity’s greatest challenge: we all take part in a procession through its realm...but we are unable to gain a foothold in it. Space is exposed to human will, but time’s reality is apart and away from us. [Time] belongs exclusively to God...”

Or, as we just sang, “Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all its sons away...”

This is the terror of it, and this is perhaps why we seem ever to retreat into the comforts of space, the comforts of place and the matter which makes place significant to us: we can control it to a far greater degree, we can manipulate it and leave our mark on it. It confirms our being, while time seems indifferent to our being.

This inability to manage and manipulate and control time: this seems to be what signifies it to Heschel as the realm of God.

I wonder if Jesus’ anger at the Temple was anger at humanity’s persistent drive to hide amidst the comforts of space and place and matter, was a zealous need to force us into the more fearsome, awesome realm of time—this phenomenon that isn’t vulnerable to corruption, that suffers neither rot nor mold nor rust nor ruin, that triggers not the envy of which can then trigger conflict and the urge for conquest or destruction, this phenomenon that is radically equitable for its being so strangely arbitrary. We all get 24 hours in a day. We all get seven days in a week. We all get 365 days in a year, though how many years we get is anyone’s guess.

I wonder if Jesus’ anger at the Temple and its busy, self-perpetuating marketplace, is reflective of God’s apparent ambivalence about such things as the Temple and all the sorts of things that take place over and against the things that take time. Yes, I wonder if Jesus’ anger at the Temple is reflective of God’s call to us to enter into God’s realm of time—this mysterious, powerful, out-of-control realm—and our deep desire not to submit to those terrible, awesome terms, that terrible, awesome realm.

We have had a remarkable opportunity in this pandemic to enter into the terrible, awesome realm like never before at least in my lifetime. I have loved it, this gift of time. I have loathed it, resented it, found in it deep wells of sorrow, found in bright moments of heaven.

When it was becoming clear that we'd need to be out of our meetinghouses if we wanted to gather as a whole church, when, with winter, it became clear that worshipping on-line was going to be an essential aspect of our life together as church, one thing I came to realize about myself as a worship leader is I couldn't film something ahead of time and upload it onto YouTube or some such. I couldn't make worship a canned production. Others of my colleagues have made that move; others of our congregational sort have decided on this mode for getting through COVID. And I have no argument with that. But for me, what is essential, I came to realize, was to be together in time. If we couldn't share in the same place, I needed us at least to occupy the same moment, the same time.

I love our meetinghouses. I love Monterey's for its being the right size for the needs of the congregation and the town. I love Church on the Hill's especially now that we have a plan for how to make it more fitting for our purposes as church, hoping to serve also the town, and to honor our past and to strike out into a hopeful future, which is to dwell in the fulness of God's time. But I could leave these commonplaces behind for now, (or gather in them, as now, with though a remnant of the church). What I couldn't leave is common time.

Something happens when we gather in seeking the Lord. Something occurs when we gather at an appointed time to speak the Lord's name and to invoke his presence. Even when we do it on Zoom, we can build that cathedral in time, that temporal Temple. It has sustained me through this otherwise splaying and blurring of time, to say nothing of the emptying out of place and space. "How lonely lies the city that once was so full of people." This first line of the book of Lamentations has crossed my mind as I go about life these days.

"How lonely lies the city that once was so full of people."

Amidst that lament, though, is this sustaining thing: shared time in the worship of the Lord who blesses out meeting places but perhaps only insofar as they call us into time, a moment that's momentous for its recalling to us a fullness of God's presence.

Now.

Now.

Forever now.

Turns out Zoom is room enough for now.

Thanks be to God.