

Exodus 20:1-17 Psalm 19 1

Corinthians 1:18-25 John 2:13-22

Well, Jesus certainly got our attention this morning!! The mild-mannered Prince of Peace steps out of character, makes a whip of cords and physically runs people out of the Temple. Overturning the tables of the moneychangers and yelling at the vendors selling animals for sacrifices, Jesus makes it perfectly clear how he feels about the activities going on at the Temple. But what in the world does the cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem in approximately 30AD have to do with Lent in 2021? That's a very good question! As it turns out these two events have more in common than we might think. Jesus and his disciples have made their way to Jerusalem to prepare for the celebration of the Passover. For them, this time of preparation readies them to remember and to celebrate the saving and redeeming grace of God in rescuing the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt by the Passing Over of the angel of death that killed all the firstborn among the Egyptians and paved the way for the escape of the Hebrews through the parted Red Sea waters. Jesus and his followers went to the Temple in Jerusalem to participate in the preparation for the most sacred remembrance of Passover. It was a time much like our season of Lent in which we make preparations for celebrating the saving and redeeming grace of God in the resurrection of Jesus that paved the way for entrance into eternal life for all who believe in him. For both the ancient Jews and the modern Christians, the time of preparation focuses on contrition and sacrifices to God. It is a time of recognizing our sinfulness and making amends to God. It involves both humility in recognizing our own sinfulness and gratitude to God for the saving event itself. And it is a time of repentance...of changing our ways going forward. There are multiple parallels between Passover and Easter. And both are preceded with some significant preparation. Jesus and his disciples made their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and to be at the Temple for this celebration. It is the dream of every Jew to be in Jerusalem for Passover. The Jews believed that God himself was present in the Holy of Holies inside the Temple. It was the place where the Ark of the Covenant had once been placed. The Holy of Holies was behind the curtain that separated God from the people. That was the same curtain that was torn from top to bottom in the

moment of Jesus' death on the cross...signaling that there was to be no more separation between God and humanity. To be present at the Temple for Passover was the ultimate spiritual experience for every Jewish person. It would be reasonable to expect that the Temple and the Temple grounds would be filled with quiet awe and reverence and prayerfulness and contemplation around the events that were about to be celebrated and commemorated there during Passover. But that's not what Jesus found when he approached the Temple in Jerusalem. What he found was a madhouse teeming with sheep and goats and doves to be purchased for sacrifices in the Temple. And moneychangers swapping out Roman coins for Jewish shekels that could be used for paying the Temple tax. Whenever money is changed, the possibility for shortchanging the customer was always there. The moneychangers were notorious for cheating. Those offering services and selling their wares were hawking their business in loud voices. The people who had come to celebrate the Passover would need to offer sacrifices to God...sacrifices of unblemished animals and birds. It was a scene of chaos with a backdrop of bleating sheep and cooing doves and noisy goats. People were jostling for position as they tried to secure what they needed. All this activity was not going on in a place apart from the Temple. It didn't happen on the Temple grounds. It happened in the Temple...predominately in the court of the Gentiles which was supposed to be reserved for prayer for those outside the Jewish faith. It was hardly the sacred space one might have expected. It was a noisy, teeming madhouse of activity. Jesus was horrified when he came upon this scene. And he behaved accordingly. Jesus is not known for his temper, but He fashioned a cord of whips and drove the moneychangers and the vendors from the Temple in a passionate display of outrage. When asked by the Temple authorities what right he had to do what he did, Jesus' reply was rather cryptic. He said "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." Taking him literally, the authorities questioned his logic since the Temple had already been 46 years in the making and was still incomplete. What they failed to grasp was Jesus' alluding to his own body as the Temple of God. It was only in retrospect that the disciples realized the meaning of Jesus' reply to the Temple authorities. After the resurrection, Jesus' comment made sense to them and their belief in him was confirmed. But what does this display of temper tell us about Jesus and Jesus' passion and his priorities? It would seem that Jesus doesn't take holy structures for granted. Whether God resides within them or not is not the point. The point is that holy

structures have been set apart as sacred space. They are reserved for God and God's presence. There are rules and expectations about how we are to honor God in sacred spaces. God gave us the rules to follow: the Ten Commandments that we heard this morning. The first four of those commandments address how we are to deal with God. The other six are rules about how God expects for us to behave with each other. There are expectations from God about how he wants us to behave in all circumstances. Jesus' display of passion at the Temple chaos gives us some insight about how God feels about our disregard for the rules and expectations...particularly in sacred spaces. Through Jesus, God lets us know that he doesn't like it. And yet, the people creating all the chaos in the Temple and those in positions in authority didn't think they were doing anything wrong. They were taking care of the business that surrounded the rituals and expectations for Passover. They thought they were being practical and helpful. We tend to think of God as being lofty and far above us. What we sometimes fail to realize is that God is right in front of us and all around us all the time. There are places, like the Temple or the Church, that are set apart specifically for God. Those are sacred spaces...spaces in which our awareness of God is heightened. And spaces in which we can offer up our prayers and songs of praise specifically for God and to God. Those sacred spaces are the ones we devote solely to God and there are certain expectations about how those spaces are to be used. The irony about the Temple cleansing story is that the Temple leaders and even the vendors may very well have believed that they were using that space in an appropriate way. After all, people needed unblemished animals and birds to make a sacrifice to God, so having them available for sale at the Temple was convenient for the pilgrims who had come for worship. And even the moneychangers were making it possible for people to pay the Temple tax by replacing Roman denarii with Jewish shekels. There's no indication that these 'helpful' people were intentionally being disrespectful to God. But Jesus' very strong reaction proved otherwise. God was neither amused nor tolerant of the disregard for sacred space. All of us know the power of sacred space. More than once, someone has told me that the sanctuary at St. Paul's is absolutely filled with the Holy Spirit. They can feel it when they enter the church. Those of us who worship here know this to be true. This structure has been here for sixty-five years. During that time, the walls have been painted with prayers. The space has been filled with sacred music. The pews have been bathed in words from the pulpit and the altar has held the elements for

thousands of celebrations of the Holy Eucharist. We know how moving and precious sacred space can be. We have intentionally reserved this space for expressions of love and gratitude and praise to God as well as contrition for our own sins. That's the purpose of sacred space. It is by its very definition set apart to be devoted to God and to all things holy. During the last year, we have missed being able to occupy our sacred space, but we have also learned that God resides in many spaces and in many situations. We know that God is with us wherever we go and wherever our attention is on Him. He's not confined to the Holy of Holies. He is in the world, just as we are. He's in the world as His Son, Jesus was and is. Our worship of God is not confined to those sacred spaces that are set apart. As we make our preparations throughout Lent to ready ourselves for the celebration of the resurrection of the Christ, may we be constantly reminded of the sacred space all around us. And may we survey all our preparations through the eyes and heart of Jesus Christ. Is Jesus pleased with what he sees as our reverence and our appreciation for the sacred space we have set aside solely for God? Or is he about to create his whip of cords to run us out of the Temple and turn over the tables of the moneychangers? God gave us the commandments and Jesus points out where we have missed the mark. May we be ever aware of God's desire for us and Jesus' critique of us as we travel to be closer to the person God created each one of us to be.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.