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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/11/2012, The Third Sunday in Lent
Exodus 20:1-17, Psalm 19, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is that divine tumult caused by our Lord Jesus in the Temple in Jerusalem:

¹⁵And when [Jesus] had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables; (John 2:15, KJV)

It is a peculiar thing, this wrath of Jesus. Normally, Jesus deals gently with others. Indeed, St. Peter points to our Lord Jesus as our appointed and trustworthy example in this earthly life:

Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: ²²Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: ²³Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously. (2 Peter 2:21-24, KJV)

Why, then, is it that he who preached such sweet things concerning the enemy -- that we should love and pray for that one -- why is it that he fashions his whip of chords and drives people and animals alike from the Temple? Why this sudden change of character?

What I want to argue in this sermon is that this divine mayhem is not in fact a change of character. It was love throughout. When Jesus was quiet and meek, it was love. And when he stormed away against the merchandizing in the Temple, it was still love at work. The method shifted, but our Lord's heart was the same: always, by whatever path he took, he was seeking souls. Our salvation was always uppermost on his mind.

CAIN

In this past Wednesday's midweek Lent sermon, we considered the wrath of Cain. Cain murdered his brother, Abel. Eve, their mother, might have fervently hoped that her first-born son would be that Crusher (to use Luther's wonderful word) the Lord had promised – one of her descendents who would crush the head of Satan. Alas, it was not to be. Her first-born son turned out not to be the Saviour but rather this world's first murderer.

There is an exhortation in the New Testament concerning anger. It is an exhortation Cain fell far short of. It goes thus:

²⁶Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath:
²⁷Neither give place to the devil... (Ephesians 4:26-27, KJV)

In this exhortation, St. Paul acknowledges that to be a human being is to be tempted by anger. We are not sticks or stones, but living beings who can be intensely disappointed, vexed, annoyed, and angry. So, “be ye angry,” the apostle says. Do not pretend that your emotions are calm. Do not deny your feelings of wrath. But, the apostle continues, “sin not.” Ahh, there’s the trick. Be angry, but do not let your anger master you. As the Lord himself warned Cain when that man was brooding with anger toward his brother:

...sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” (Genesis 4:7, NRSV)

The mastering of anger means that we never lose sight of that which is important. Whether in calm or in fury, seek the welfare of the one who stands before you.

MAMMA BEAR!

My wife, Carol, sometimes says, “Beware, mamma bear!” I bet you know what that means: anything that gets between a mother bear and her cub is toast!

Something like that seems to be going on in this morning’s Gospel story. There is something standing in the way of Jesus and his cubs. Beware! Beware! Love is afoot. Watch out! And so it is that the animals and the moneychangers have to flee the temple. Something threatened the world, including the animals and the moneychangers themselves. Merchandizing in the house of the Lord was the threat. And merchandizing in the house of the Lord was toast as far as Jesus was concerned.

NOT THE MERCHANDIZING, BUT THE LOCATION OF IT

Judging by our Lord’s cry, the problem was not the merchandizing, but the location of it. Scholars explain that the selling of animals for sacrifices and the exchanging of the common Roman or Greek coins into Jewish currency for the half-shekel Temple tax were legitimate and necessary forms of commerce. The problem was that traditionally those things were done elsewhere:

Traditionally, the various stalls selling animals and changing money had been located nearby in the Kidron Valley or on the slopes of the Mount of Olives.¹

The crisis in today's reading that drives Jesus almost to despair is that these commercial things were being conducted within the confines of the Temple. This leads Jesus to cry out:

Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise. (John 2:16, RSV)

This story of the cleansing of the Temple is one of few stories that is told in all four Gospels. In Matthew's version of the story, we hear the true nature of the Temple:

And said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called *the house of prayer*; but ye have made it a den of thieves. (Matthew 21:13, KJV)

This is the contrast that has so riled up Jesus. The chief thing about the Temple is that it was to be a "house of prayer." When one enters the Temple, what is to strike the eye, to catch the ear, and to penetrate the heart is the Word of the Lord – both the hearing of it and the answering back in prayer. The Word of the Lord: that is the thing to be cherished in the Temple and in the Church – not the hubbub of merchandizing.

PSALM 19

Now, why does Jesus care so much about God's Word – care enough, indeed, that he fashions his whip and drives the merchants out? Answer: if the Word of God is lost, all is lost, including the welfare of the doves and lambs, the animal drovers and the money-changers.

To develop this point, let's take a look at this morning's Psalm – Psalm 19. There is an interesting progression of thought in this Psalm. It puts into positive form a similar progression to be found in Psalm 1, but in that beginning Psalm, the progression is downhill. Here are those famous opening lines of the Psalms:

¹Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.
(Psalm 1:1 KJV)

Alas for the one who walks in the counsel of the ungodly. Soon, he stops walking and begins lingering: he "standeth in the way of the sinners." And soon after that,

¹ Scott Black Johnson, *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels*, pages 493-494.

he is no longer standing, but sits himself down and makes himself comfortable: he “sitteth in the seat of the scornful.” He becomes part of the scornful council.

The Psalm 1 quickly moves on to describe the one who is blessed in this world:

²But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night (Psalm 1, KJV)

Now, in this morning’s Psalm 19, we hear another progression concerning the law of the Lord, only this one is upwards, toward sanctification. Let me read a few lines from the version we sang earlier in this liturgy, from our *Lutheran Book of Worship*:

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect and revives the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure and gives wisdom to the innocent.
⁸ The statutes of the LORD are just and rejoice the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear and gives light to the eyes.
(Psalm 19:7-8, LBW)

A first point here is that the law of the Lord “revives the soul.” More precious than silver and gold is such reviving of the soul. If we can have *this*... if we who too often trespass into sin and whose hearts are too much filled with covetousness, lust, and other forms of wickedness...if we can have our souls *revived*, then we have at last turned our storm-tossed soul around and sailed into the calm harbor. We shall be converted then. If we have strayed from our baptism, we shall return to it. If we have fallen out of the ark of salvation into the raging flood, then we shall climb back in. The law of the LORD is perfect “and revives the soul.” No wonder, then, that Jesus was so troubled by the merchandizing in the Temple. It was distracting people away from the chief treasure of their Temple: the Word of the Lord whereby souls are saved.

But go on in the sequence. Not only does the law of the Lord “revive the soul,” but also it “gives wisdom to the innocent.” The revived one, then, has a new source of wisdom in this world. The repentant backslider, the prodigal son or daughter come home: they have a new reservoir of wisdom to draw upon. Their former notions did not work out so well. But in the holy ways of the Lord they have a new source of wisdom for their life going forward.

But not only this, not only does the Word of the Lord revive the soul and make the innocent wise, but also it makes that one happy:

The statutes of the LORD are just and *rejoice* the heart;

Happiness is sometimes hard to come by in this world. But the words of the apostle are as true now and as they were when he first knew them and wrote them down:

⁶There is great gain in godliness with contentment; (1 Timothy 6:6, RSV)

All of this was being ruined by the hurly-burly of commerce in the Temple. So Jesus cried out, “Take these things hence,” and the disciples looking on were put in mind of the momma bear protecting her cub:

¹⁷And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up. (John 2:17, KJV)

MAX PETSCHKEK

If our Lord Jesus hurls out the merchants with such vigor, just imagine what he is going to do with those great enemies of mankind, sin, death, and the devil. They they are, supposing that they can intervene between Jesus and his people. They have another thought coming.

In our intercessions this morning, for example, we are going to give thanks for the life of one of our dear members: Max Petschkek. Does death imagine that it can really separate Max from Jesus? Impossible! The hurling out of the moneychangers is but a mild symbol for what is in store for anything in all this world that would try to separate the believer from Christ!

You have done well in this matter of the Word of the Lord, for here you are, in church, even in church when daylight savings time began last night and you lost an hour of sleep.

For you and for me, we are now in the Temple in Jerusalem. It as if in this liturgy we are transported back into the Temple, for here we are, in the very presence of this same Jesus Christ. He is our Temple, for he is the very presence of God among us:

¹⁹For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:19, RSV)

Let us, then, not do to ourselves what even death on a cross could not do: Golgotha could not destroy this Temple, for in three days, he rose again. But let us not be distant from him. Let not merchandizing, or the distractions of the city, or the lures of sin, or any such a thing deprive of us Jesus and of his ways.

All things good and important for us lie at hand: the reviving of our souls, our wisdom, and happiness are waiting for us through the person, the grace, and the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.