

**THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT
MARCH 3, 2024**



**ST. JOHN UNITED
CHURCH OF CHRIST**

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Ushers –

***RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP**

ONE: Into the house of God we are called to enter,

MANY: to worship and receive the gift of grace.

ONE: As we step towards this sacred space,

MANY: we acknowledge all that can distract or exploit.

ONE: God calls upon us to cleanse our houses of all that does not find its source in God's love.

MANY: Together we give ourselves in worship and right relations with our neighbor. Let us worship God.

***INVOCATION:**

O God of temples and tables turned over, we enter this sacred space of worship seeking your transformation and healing. Make us ready for the kind of turned upside down world you are seeking to build among us. We have come to this place of worship to be changed, so turn over our tables and make us whole. In the name of Jesus our savior. Amen.

***PRAYER OF TRANSFORMATION AND NEW LIFE:**

Holy God, there are times when we choose to bring our folly and the many reckless ways of exploiting the poor into your house. Sometimes without our even knowing it. And so, when our houses of worship need change or when we have wandered from your ways, help us to turn towards you. Not because of what we can gain from you, but because your love is a gift unearned and unwavering. Grant us your grace, in the name of Christ. Amen.

***WORDS OF GRACE:**

God's compassion is deep and wide, from everlasting to everlasting. In seeking to transform this world, God's love reaches towards each of us with a tender embrace. Let this be our assurance this day and always. Amen.

EPISTLE LESSON: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

The words of the Apostle Paul

Human wisdom versus the cross

¹⁸ The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved. ¹⁹ It is written in scripture: *I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will reject the intelligence of the intelligent.* ²⁰ Where are the wise? Where are the legal experts? Where are today's debaters? Hasn't God made the wisdom of the world foolish? ²¹ In God's wisdom, he determined that the world wouldn't come to know him through its wisdom. Instead, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of preaching. ²² Jews ask for signs, and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, which is a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. ²⁴ But to those who are called—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God's power and God's wisdom. ²⁵ This is because the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

***GOSPEL LESSON: John 2:13-22**

Jesus in Jerusalem at Passover

¹³ It was nearly time for the Jewish Passover, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ He found in the temple those who were selling cattle, sheep, and doves, as well as those involved in exchanging currency sitting there. ¹⁵ He made a whip from ropes and chased them all out of the temple, including the cattle and the sheep. He scattered the coins and overturned the tables of those who exchanged currency. ¹⁶ He said to the dove sellers, "Get these things out of here! Don't make my Father's house a place of business." ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written, *Passion for your house consumes me.*

¹⁸ Then the Jewish leaders asked him, "By what authority are you doing these things? What miraculous sign will you show us?"

¹⁹ Jesus answered, "Destroy this temple and in three days I'll raise it up."

²⁰ The Jewish leaders replied, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But the temple Jesus was talking about was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said, and they believed the scripture and the word Jesus had spoken.

MESSAGE: The Anger of Jesus

The big question. Was Jesus ever angry? If so, why?

To answer that question, there are many details that we must cover so the story makes sense to all of us. I'm sure many of us have heard about the "cleansing of the temple", however this story in the Gospel of John is not what I remember. That's because we have four Gospels, each written by a different person, at a different time in history, with a different agenda or purpose. Last week the lectionary had us read from the Gospel of Mark. This week we have the Gospel of John. So we must change our "listening ears" to a different genre.

At first sight, John has a quite different chronology of the life of Jesus from that of the other three gospels. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke Jesus is depicted as going to Jerusalem only once; The Passover Feast after which he was crucified. But in the Gospel of John we find Jesus making frequent visits to Jerusalem, at least three times. In the other three Gospels the main ministry of Jesus is in Galilee. In John, Jesus is in Galilee only for brief periods and his main ministry is in Jerusalem.

The truth is that there is no real contradiction here. John and the others are telling the story from different points of view; they actually complement each other. They are not contradictions. Rather we can use these four different views of Jesus to get as complete a picture of the life of Jesus as possible.

However, even Williams Barclay, the Bible scholar, admits that there is real difficulty we must face in this

passage that tells of the incident known as the cleansing of the Temple. John sets the incident right at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, while the other three gospel writers set it right at the end.

We must remember that John was not interested in writing a chronological biography of Jesus but he was supremely interested in showing Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah. In all likelihood, John put this story at the beginning of his Gospel to emphasize that Jesus was in fact the Messiah of God who had come to cleanse the worship of men and women and to open the door to God.

So now let's look at why Jesus acted as he did in the Temple. As was mentioned in the Bible text, it was almost the time for the Passover, the greatest of all the Jewish feasts. The Jewish law stated that every adult male Jew who lived within fifteen miles of Jerusalem was bound to attend the Passover in Jerusalem. However, many Jews who lived more than 15 miles away also traveled to Jerusalem for Passover. It is said that sometimes there were more than 2 million Jews who were in Jerusalem at the time of the annual Passover Feast.

There was a tax that every Jew over nineteen years of age must pay; it was called the Temple tax and it was used to cover the expenses of the Temple sacrifices and rituals throughout the whole year. The tax was one half-shekel which was the equivalent of almost 2 work days of wages. For all ordinary

purposes in Palestine, all kinds of currency were valid. But the Temple tax had to be paid either in Galilean shekels or in shekels of the sanctuary. However, pilgrims arrived in Jerusalem from all over the world with all kinds of coins. So, in the Temple courts there sat the money-changers. If their trade had been straightforward they would have been fulfilling an honest and a necessary purpose. But what they did was to charge a commission for every half-shekel they changed, and to make a second charge on every half-shekel of change they had to give if a larger coin was tendered. So, if a man came with a coin the value of which was two shekels, he had to pay to get it changed, and again to get his change of three half-shekels. In other words, the money-changers made considerable capital out of this pilgrim on such a transaction the equivalent of one day's wage.

What enraged Jesus was that pilgrims to the Passover, who could ill afford it, were being fleeced at an exorbitant rate by the money-changers. It was a rampant and shameless social injustice and what was worse, it was being done in the name of religion.

Besides the money-changers there were also the sellers of oxen and sheep and doves. *(Can you imagine having these animals in the middle of our church?) Frequently a visit to the Temple meant a sacrifice.)* Many a pilgrim would wish to make thank-offerings for a favorable journey to the holy city; and most acts and events in life had their appropriate

animal sacrifice. It might therefore seem to be a natural and helpful thing that the victims for the sacrifices could be bought in the Temple court. It might have been so but the law was that any animal offered in sacrifice must be perfect and unblemished. The Temple authorities had appointed inspectors to examine the victims which were to be offered, and a fee was charged for this inspection. If a worshipper bought a victim outside the Temple, it would almost certainly be rejected by the inspectors. For example, if a pair of doves could cost as much as fifteen times more inside the Temple than if it had been purchased outside. *(It is similar to going to a Cardinals game. It is cheaper to buy your peanuts from a vendor outside the stadium than buying them inside the stadium. But then you have to hide them under your jacket when going through the gates.)*

So here again was bare-faced extortion at the expense of poor and humble pilgrims, who are practically blackmailed into buying their animals for sacrifice from the Temple booths if they wished to sacrifice at all – once more a glaring social injustice aggravated by the fact that it was perpetrated in the name of pure religion.

It was all this which moved Jesus to anger. Just because Jesus loved God, he loved God's children, and it was impossible for him to stand passively by while the worshippers of Jerusalem were treated this way.

Were there other reasons why Jesus was angry about the Temple? Yes and perhaps you have seen these indiscretions in today's churches. First of all, Jesus was angry because God's house was being desecrated. In the Temple, there was worship without reverence. According to William Barclay, "worship without reverence can be a terrible thing. It may be worship which is formalized and pushed through anyhow; the most dignified prayers on earth can be read like a passage from an auctioneer. It may be worship which does not realize the holiness of God.

Secondly, Jesus acted as he did in order to show that the whole paraphernalia of animal sacrifice was completely irrelevant. For centuries the prophets had been saying exactly that. In Isaiah 1:11-13 we can read, "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? Says the Lord.; I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or goats . . .bringing offerings is futile." Jesus acted as he did to show that no sacrifice of any animal can ever put a person right with God.

There was another reason that Jesus was not happy with the way the Temple was managed. There were four courts in the building; the Court of the Gentiles, then the Court of the Women, then the Court of Israelites, then the Court of the Priests. The buying and selling was going on in the Court of the

Gentiles, which was the only place into which a Gentile might come. Beyond that point, access to him was barred. O then if there was a Gentile whose heart God had touched, he might come into the Court of the Gentiles to meditate and pray and distantly touch God. This court was the only place he knew to pray. Unfortunately, the Temple authorities and the Jewish traders were making this court into an uproar and a rabble where no one could pray. The lowing of the oxen, the bleating of the sheep, the cooling of the doves the shouts of the traders, the rattle of the coins, the voices raised in bargaining disputes – you can imagine the level of the noise. So much for silent prayer. The conduct in the Temple Court shut out the seeking Gentile from the presence of God. You can imagine what Jesus thought of that.

I know this was a lot of information. I believe most of us picture Jesus as a smiling, loving person who never shows anger. I wanted you to know and understand why he was angry on this one occasion.

Comparing the Temple to our little church here, I'm so glad that St. John is an Open and Affirming congregation. We shut out no one. Everyone is welcome here even if they don't have a dime in their pocket. I believe that every Sunday God is smiling on all of you for being inviting and accepting. Do you

think Jesus would be angry if he attended our worship service? I hope not. Amen

PASTORAL PRAYER: God above but not beyond us; Jesus of history, Christ of glory; Spirit of God's presence: may our Lenten penitence be more than a season commitment to humility before you. We come to you in Christ's name, who is our wisdom, our virtue, our Redeemer, who is all we need in this world. Jesus is the answer to all our worries, our trials, our tribulations, our loneliness, our pain and sorrow. Thank you God for sharing your Son with us.

Divine Physician, you heal our bodies, minds, and spirits, curing our ills, calming our minds, renewing our spirits. Grant your healing to all who look to you for complete wholeness and holiness, including those on our prayer list.

We know you are with us every moment and we can feel your presence during this time of Lent as we examine our hearts and lives as we follow Jesus listen to his words, and strive to be more like him, as we pray the prayer he taught us. . .

THE LORD'S PRAYER: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

INVITATION TO GENEROSITY:

The richness of God's love extends to all persons and in response to God's abundant compassion, we are invited into a spirit of generosity so that God's love may be known to the very ends of the earth. Let us give generously.

HOLY COMMUNION

INVITATION

God is with you!

And God is with us all.

Open wide your hearts.

We open them completely to the Spirit of God.

May God's love nurture your wandering spirits each day.

May God's light sustain your souls each night.

PRAYER OF COMMUNION

This is a season of wilderness-

The season we grasp to understand the Divine just a little more. This is the time for us to reach inwards to find the self that God sees. This is the chance for us to gaze outwards, caring for the Christ in our midst.

The Lenten roads are long Yet full of gifts.

The Lenten paths often seem chilly

Yet warm with the winds of the Spirit.
The Spirit of God is the light that leads us in the
hushed nights. The Christ is our companion on the
journey in the intense sunlight of day.
We remember his time in the wilderness-
The struggles. The hunger. The peace.
And as we seek the Divine in our midst,
On this journey, we crave the bread of life.
On our desert roads, we thirst for the fruit of the vine,
the cup of blessings.
Through Jesus the Christ's story, we remember the
night before his arrest,
The night of serenity, solemnity, and love.
Jesus took in his hands bread from the table.
He broke it and blessed it.
Eat in remembrance of me, he said.

And after supper, as the night grew long,
Jesus took a cup, and filled it with the fruit of the
vine. As he blessed it, he spoke aloud to them
Take and drink and always remember me.

May the Spirit who traveled with Christ in the
wilderness and fills us with the hope of God
Surround these elements.
May the Spirit speak to us in this season of wilderness
Becoming our strength on this journey
And filling our lives with love. Amen.

SHARING THE ELEMENTS

***UNISON PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING:**

Divine Light of Our Journey-

**In a spirit of gratitude we give thanks for this time
your Holy Meal.**

**This time at the Table filled us with strength,
Knowing that as we continue on this Lenten journey,
We will find your peace surrounding us.
Amen.**

***BENEDICTION:**

God has turned our world upside down and called us
to a life of transformation. Now, go forth changed,
called anew, and turned towards a God who makes us
whole. Amen and Amen!