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Trinity Lutheran Church of Las Cruces
Lent 3
Exodus 20:1-20
John 2:13-25

Psalm 19

[Psalm 69]

Hymn of the Day: "God of Tempest, God of Whirlwind" #400 ELW verses 2,3,4

ZEAL For God's House

What ticks Jesus off so much today in the Gospel of John chapter 2?

It's Passover. This is a big religious holiday, and Jesus, like 100s of thousands of his fellow Jews, comes to Jerusalem for the week long festivities –people were coming from all the surrounding cities and countries where they have been scattered, it is like a giant homecoming.

They come to remember and celebrate God's strange and wonderful story -- the Jewish people had been slaves in Egypt. Long ago God had commanded each Jewish household to sacrifice a perfect lamb, put the blood of that lamb on the doorposts, and God would save them from Pharaoh's hard labor, save them from a thousand small Egyptian gods and most of all, God would save them from the culture of death in Egypt and its surroundings.

And the Jews coming to the Temple in Jerusalem in Jesus' day, would remember how God did save them: God DID lead them out of Egypt in the Great Passover, through the waters of the sea, to the Promised Land, where they could build a temple and worship the One True God.

So a great symbol of that Passover ... was the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.

The Temple was a place where the real Presence of God was said to dwell... the word is *Shekinah*... the mysterious and powerful Presence of God.

So people came not only to celebrate the Passover holiday and eat the big Passover dinner!

– but also they came to commune with God and with each other, to offer their best and to celebrate their heritage as God's Chosen People.

It was also, frankly, big business for the city.

In fact, most scholars think King Herod's rebuilding of the temple in Jesus' day was *mostly* an economic and political initiative, it didn't have much to do with actual worship. King Herod wanted to make a name for himself – solidify his political power -- that's why this temple had been under construction for 46 years! There's a lot of employment with construction... and a lot of corruption with construction....

One interesting detail I think is that Herod had arranged for a huge golden eagle to be displayed over one of the entrance gates – despite the warning in the Ten Commandments to NOT make any “graven images” or idols to bow down to, King Herod wanted to be sure the Jewish people knew they were only allowed to worship because of the mighty protection of Rome – politically symbolized by that Eagle. This was already a corruption of the temple.

It WAS an impressive structure -- Herod had enlarged the Temple campus to 35 acres with gleaming white marble pillars visible for miles around -- you can still see part of the Western wall if you visit Jerusalem today – those rocks are massive.

The temple was an important part of Jesus' life. This is the place he was brought when he was a baby. This is the place he had come every year with his family since he was a boy.

So despite the fact that it was King Herod who built it, despite the fact that it was the Romans who “protected” or controlled it, despite the fact it was still a place of segregation – male/female, Jew/ Gentile, priest/layperson, - the Temple is a place Jesus loved.

Because because, God promised to **be** there.

But this year, when Jesus comes to the temple for the Passover, he gets very ticked off.

According to the Gospel of John, it's the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and maybe he feels a new huge sense of responsibility for His Father's House.

This year Jesus sees people selling cattle and sheep and pigeons (Pigeons -- because you know if you were too poor to sacrifice cattle or sheep, God said, a pair of pigeons is okay. You can buy pigeons for a few pennies. The idea seems to be every Jew, no matter how poor, can participate in making an acceptable, beautiful, worthy, perfect offering to God.)

However, animals had to be checked over by the priests to be sure they were “unblemished” and scholars have discovered that in those days, the priests would *so often* find something a little wrong especially with the home-grown offerings. AND, guess what, the same priests would just happen to have some pre-certified USDA Prime Plus sheep, cattle or if you couldn't offer anything better, some certified doves, which could be purchased at a very special price today only. A special price which turned out to be ten times what you would pay at an ordinary market. And if heaven help you you couldn't afford it, well then, move along, you have no business here.

The money changers had a similar deal going on - Everyone was supposed to pay a half-shekel Temple tax, but, you couldn't pay with the Roman coins because they were stamped with a picture of Caesar and that's a graven image! Never mind the big gold graven image eagle in the gateway, that's Herod who put that up but this is you!

Right over here, very *conveniently* located in the temple courtyard, you can exchange your money for a very reasonable commission... let's say two hundred percent of the face value. [The part about the money exchangers always reminds me of one of my first visits to the Lutheran Churches in Myanmar in S/E Asia, I thought I was very clever by exchanging one hundred USD right at the airport from the government approved exchange kiosk. Pastor Martin whom I was meeting... almost cried when he saw the exchange rate I had gotten which really ended up being about \$30 worth of the local currency. \$70 worth of commission had gone straight into that government official's pockets.)

So why was Jesus so ticked off?

It's a memorable scene - He flicks a whip. He drives the sellers and money changers out and he says, [this is key of course, we should always pay attention to what Jesus actually, exactly says!]:

“Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

Two things here: One, Jesus’ Jewish disciples – immediately recognized a fulfillment of prophecy from Psalm 69 (verse 9) “ZEAL for your house will consume me.”

Second thing is: Jesus loves the bricks and fabrics of his father’s house -- NOT because they are made with ancient stones or new & shiny gold decorations... but the physical walls have been a place where God’s people have come together to remember who God is, to experience his *Shekinah*, the Holy Presence.

And a marketplace is the opposite of that. A market is a place where people with money have the power, and people with power make the money. A market is a place you compete against the person next to you. AND for poor people, a market is the place you see what you can only wish you could afford to buy.

God’s Temple should be the opposite of that.

God’s Temple is a place people come together to remember who God is, to give their best and most in worship, most of all, a place where God comes to meet us again.

In the Gospel today, Jesus tells the world that He, Jesus, is the new temple, the Third and Final Temple, the living temple of God.

And let’s just begin to bring the analogy home to us today: God’s Church – as the Body of Christ, the New Temple - must be the opposite of a marketplace, too.

God’s Church is a place where Jesus comes to meet us again.

His Holy Presence in the water, in the Word; In the Bread, in the Wine...

AND in the living stones of this gathered group – each one of you is a living stone in God's New Temple.

May we in the Church be angered -- ticked off - only by the same things which anger God.

And may we always have ZEAL – love passionately - exactly what God loves about His Church – a gathering of God's Chosen People, we are here to meet God again. Let's not allow ANYTHING ANYTHING to interfere with that. Amen.