

March 4, 2018
A Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent
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GOSPEL

John 2:13-22

The holy gospel according to Saint John, the second chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making 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. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After 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.

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

In Genesis these past two weeks, we have journeyed through stories of covenant...first with Noah and his family and all the creatures of earth...then with Abraham and Sarah...and today we come to Exodus...to the Big Covenant...the one we probably know best...to the Ten Commandments...or the Decalogue...which means the Ten Words...as many of our Jewish siblings know them. The Ten Best Ways is what we call them in our Godly Play room.

This is the centerpiece of the covenant as we know it, I think...This is the covenant the terms of which many of us have memorized...at one time or another...even if we remember less perfectly now.

In the Water from the Well group that has been meeting on Sunday evenings, we have been talking about the idea of covenant quite a bit. About who gets to initiate a covenant...and about how a covenant gets broken.

This isn't just an everyday contract between equals. There's a reason it has a special and uncommon sort of name. A covenant, especially one like we read in Exodus 20, delivered to Moses on Sinai on behalf of the people who God has led out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom...A covenant like this is made between the powerful ruler, and a much less powerful person or people who offer their allegiance to the ruler in exchange for protection.

From my research this week, I learned a bit more about the answer to one question we came up with last Sunday evening at Water from the Well...which is how a covenant gets broken. If the people are not loyal, does that void the promise of protection? Because if that's how it works...it seems like we would be in trouble.

But we know from the stories of our ancestors that God has been faithful in spite of us...God seems to keep these promises, even when we don't keep ours.

And this week, I learned that...while either party might be unfaithful to the terms of a covenant...only the ruler can declare the covenant to be void...to be ended. It makes sense, in retrospect, that the one with the power gets to say how it is...but it is interesting that the weaker parties success or failure to live up to the terms of the covenant only matters as much as the ruler decides it does.

And maybe that explains somewhat how the covenant journey has played out in the life of God' chosen...and fickle...and often faithless and disloyal people.

We get things all sorts of sideways. Before Moses could get back down the mountain, we were getting it wrong...abandoning the God who saves us...for the shinier gods who seem closer to hand.

The world is alive with other gods for us to choose...and we have been for generations upon generations. And despite having many reasons to declare the covenant over...God hasn't.

This weekend some folks got to attend the first of three learning gatherings, which are part of the Missional River journey we will be on in the next year or so. On Friday and Saturday we began to learn and practice processes for listening deeply to Scripture, to one another, and to our neighbors...to connect us to God's presence and our purpose in this season of our life.

As part of that gathering, we were invited to remember and find ways to share the story of our remarkable God...to remember, in fact, that we have a remarkable God.

With the thoughts from that time in my mind, and with Exodus and the gospel of John in front of me, I realized that there is one common first step on the path to getting turned around in our covenant journey...I see it in Exodus and when Jesus cleanses the temple...and in my own life and our world today...

And I wonder if you will see it this way, too...

To see if you do, I'm going to retrace my steps so you can join me...

What I wonder is... when you first think of them...what do you remember about the Ten Commandments...the Ten Words or Ten Best Ways?

Now it depends on how you number them...there are at least two different ways to do it...but I wonder what you remember the First Word...the First Message of the Decalogue to be...

How do these words of covenant begin?

Now, the fact that we call them Commandments makes it harder for us to remember, I think.

Because the first word is, "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."

And depending on how you number the rest...that is number one...all by itself. Not a commandment as much as a truth from which everything that follows will flow (which is arguably why Luther adds in, not making an idol as part of the First Commandment...but he parts with the Jewish tradition in doing so).

The First Word, is a declaration of the reality of who our remarkable God is.

What we do about it...only comes after that truth is proclaimed.

This is related, I think, to Jesus coming into the temple and turning over tables... His anger comes from seeing that first truth set aside...We are so eager to get about our own business...even our own business of being holy and good...that we fail to realize that we have no business of our own inside the temple. It all begins in who our remarkable God is...and that God has chosen to reach out to us and give us life and freedom. The temple as a marketplace is arguably the story of a people who've forgotten their purpose...their reason...their remarkable God.

It turns things around. It makes things into nonsense. And eventually, it breaks the very fabric of who we are.

It is like walking in to find a yoga class happening in the produce section of HEB...or a pottery class on a submarine...or an interpretative dance in an intersection...only more offensive...

For some of us, it might be like seeing the photos of people clutching AR-15's in a worship service...for others, it might be like seeing the mockery certain despotic governments make by claiming to have free and fair elections...It is like cosmetic companies advertising that everyone is beautiful, but still only showing us bodies without disabilities, cellulite, and different shades of skin.

When we forget who we are and who God is...we become fools at best...and liars and destroyers at worst.

And one of the most amazing things is...that a solution to our confusion...our nonsense...our lack of direction can begin simply...with receiving again the voice of God...saying..."I am your God. You are my people. I have given you life and brought you into freedom." That is where we begin.

We don't have to do anything to sort ourselves out. In fact, one of the most important ways we get sorted out is by stopping. Putting down any sense we might have that we will fix this...and realizing that neither us nor our actions are the source of our being.

Everything begins in this: God has put the breath of life into you. God is the one who leads the way to freedom. God has claimed you.

If you feel frantic or unmoored...afraid or angry...or just as confused as someone at a yoga class in the produce section...then rest yourself into this truth first – God has reached out to you and declared you a precious child of the Author of Creation.

And if you can't find the voice speaking that truth today, be gentle with yourself. What we go through in life can make it hard to hear and even harder to believe.

We have a great deal to do...God has a lot of good work to give to us. But it all begins in this truth. Because the work of believing this is the first thing. This is the first word.

"I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery..." This is the source of all our hope. And there is a lot that comes after that First Word. But maybe sometimes, the First Word is enough.

Thanks be to God. Amen.