

SPG#198, Lent 3B

March 15, 2009

Exodus 20:1-17

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22

Throughout scripture, Old and New Testaments, the symbol of the Temple is pervasive. It was originally built in Jerusalem by King Solomon on the site where Abraham would have sacrificed Isaac. Over generations the Temple assumed central importance for Judaism. Pilgrimages were made to the Temple regularly and in high feast seasons like Passover. When the northern part of Israel had been conquered in 722 BC and the southern part in 586BC the Temple had been destroyed. The people had been sent into exile. In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Old Testament the people are finally released from exile and allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple. Thus there grew up in Judaism the strong and pervasive symbol of the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple. When the Temple and Jerusalem were leveled in 70 AD, the strong symbolic imagery continued with the anticipation of the restoration of the Temple. After that destruction in 70, Judaism took on a more dispersed existence apart from Jerusalem. And out of that dispersion, or the diaspora, as it is called, the synagogues came into being as a substitute for the Temple.

At the same time Islam claims the Temple Mount as a holy place having to do with Mohammed. So you can see why the Temple area in Jerusalem is hotly contested.

Jesus, in his growing up years, would have been a regular visitor to the Temple.

While with the disciples near the Temple one day he said, **This Temple will be destroyed, but in three days will be raised up.**

He was referring to his own death and resurrection. But he attached that reference to the Temple being destroyed and restored. To speak of such things in the first century was to bring to mind the deep hopes, dreams, and meaning of being part of the people of God, which meant that you looked for the restoration of what had been taken away or destroyed.

With that small background, let us look at today's gospel. The gospel today is about Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the temple. In tradition it is called the cleansing of the temple. The time is near the time of the Passover. People are making their annual visit to Jerusalem during Passover. Jesus enters the temple, and finds people selling cattle and sheep and doves in the courtyard part of the temple. Making a whip, he drives out the cattle and the sheep, and tells those who are selling doves to leave. Also present were moneychangers, who served the function of converting money, or coins one had from a different city into money used in Jerusalem. Jesus also drove them out.

We have here a picture of Jesus, incensed that the temple, the house of God, was being used for marketplace activities. The description of the event in the gospel of John encourages us to provide our own images of Jesus driving out livestock, overturning tables, and telling dove sellers to get out. In the second part of the reading, Jesus refers to the temple as his own body, which will be crucified and resurrected.

Paula Fredriksen, biblical scholar at Boston University, says that we could take this account as Jesus condemning Judaism. However, Fredriksen says she doubts that.

She says that the gospel of John was written after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD by the Romans. Thus, the gospel writer, she says, as the gospel is being written, is cognizant and reminiscent of the images of destruction, not only of the temple, but of the whole city of Jerusalem.

Fredriksen says the story is more reminiscent of the tradition in Judaism where the temple is destroyed, but then rebuilt, or where the people go into exile, but return. The cleansing of the temple is a reference to the undoing that must occur for something new to be built.

That something new in today's gospel is the final temple of God, or as the gospel of Mark says, "the temple not made by the hand of humans." This final temple is a new era, a new dominion, the Kingdom of God.

And so, today's gospel refers to the cleansing, the undoing, the change that precedes what is to come, the Kingdom of God.

In many ways St. Paul's is cleansing its own temple as the Long Range Planning Committee prepares to discuss our own plans for the future: what to let go, what to keep, what to change, what to expand.

And those discussions do not have to do with just physical space. And just like in other parts of life there are things for us to let go of and release. There are things to keep. And there are things for us to change. When the committee is finished with those discussions we will open yet another door to the next chapter at St. Paul's.

In the same way as we look at our lives as individuals, there are things we should release. For it no longer makes sense to hold on to them. There are things for us to keep. And there are things for us to change.

There have been times in a counseling relationship when both the person I was working with, and myself, knew that in our relationship we had faced and passed through a lot of difficult times, a lot of grief, a lot of agony together. On the other side of those experiences, after some change and some undoing, we found ourselves in what I will call a tender moment when quietly decisions and resolutions were made. Those decisions would form the basis for a new life and a new experience.

As I look out over the faithful of St. Paul's, in realization of our hopes and dreams as a church. As I look at the world, the economy, and the state of flux in our environment, I perceive that St. Paul's is in the midst of a tender moment. It is a time for quiet reflection. The decisions made in tender moments are not loud or prominent. They are quiet decisions. But their roots are very deep. They change our lives from here on out.

Some examples:

I am going to be more loving with my family, my friends, my co-workers. I am going to be more understanding of people I know, including those who are hard to understand. I will be more compassionate. I will be more patient. I will be more loyal. In a tender moment, we can realize that the person we have been eating lunch with is not only a friend, but will be a friend for life. In a tender moment, we can realize that the relationship with a spouse has assumed a new depth. In a tender moment, we can realize that our involvement in church is not just a catalog of duties and responsibilities that disturb our convenience and comfort, but an opportunity to expand faith and love.

In a tender moment, we can realize that the problem that seemed overwhelming and insurmountable is really a monumental challenge that we can deliberately and quietly work on. In a tender moment, sometimes we find a way to forgive what in the past has been unforgivable. Sometimes we find hope, where there had been no hope.

Sometimes we find that we are able to lay aside anger permanently that before had been a frequent and pervasive visitor. Sometimes in a tender moment, we find that we are able to lay aside a bad habit, or even an addiction.

These quiet decisions represent the cleansing of the temples of our own lives. Those decisions have implications for the change of today and the Kingdom of God in the future. And indeed, the tender moment gives me pause to look back, to see the person I have been. I can see what I must do now to be a new and different person in the future.

And beyond specific examples of creativity and change, in the tender moment of Lent this year we have a chance to be better than we have ever been before. We have a chance to be more Christlike than we have ever been before.

The legacies that we inherit from ancestors are very powerful. We cannot change the genetic makeup we were given. We will live with the physical characteristics we were given, more or less, all our lives. And in many, many cases we willingly embrace the legacy of the past. Because in the past, we learned at the knees of our ancestors how to live responsibly, lovingly, and truthfully. But also, in many cases, we hear sad accounts of people who treat others in the same shameful way they were treated as a child.

In a tender moment, in a quiet decision, that cycle can be broken. In quiet reflection we can look back and say, "I will not be that way."

And so, in the midst of quiet decisions, in this Lent, as we look at our reflection in the mirror, we see, to a degree, what needs to be changed, what needs to be kept, what needs removing. And perhaps we get a glimpse of the future person, a shining saint, the person God is calling us to be today.

With the building materials of those people in quiet reflection, God is building a new dominion, full of unimaginable beauty, love, and rest.

Let us then be about the keeping, the letting go, the changing that leads us in this tender moment to quiet decisions. Let us not be afraid to step into that work, into that newness, into the light, into the Kingdom of God. Amen.