

Lent 3, Year B
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
March 3, 2024

Exodus 20:1-17 Psalm 19 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 John 2:13-22

Spring has definitely sprung! The daffodils show off their bright yellow, white and green fronds and flowers, practically daring us to come out of any gloom we might be feeling. The dandelions have flowered and gone to seed, already preparing for future springs, for lengthening days ... and Lent. Lent seems out of place in God's display of brilliant color, new growth, and increasing hours of sunlight. It makes sense that Easter comes in the time of new life, but – Lent?

We have been invited to a holy Lent, a time of fasting, almsgiving, and prayer; a time to examine our lives and better align our wills with God's will for us. We begin each service with penitence, punctuated by the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. We withhold some joy in our worship, leaving out certain words and keeping reminders of the season in some sparseness in our worship space. Yes, we remember that we are dust, that our lives are finite. We remember that we distance ourselves from God – that's sin – and that we need to turn back. But "holy" does not fit only penitence. This beautiful springing forth in nature reminds us that resurrection is not only ahead but at hand. Even in Lent, the gospel will not be hidden. Even while we repent and remember our mortality, God is with us.

We hear two powerful stories of God today. The first, from the book of Exodus, recalls God's giving of the Ten Commandments, the Ten words in Judaism. Judaic tradition numbers the commandments differently than we do. We count the first commandment as "thou shalt have no other gods before me." In Judaism, the first commandment is "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have" In everything, God. First, God. We are given words of comfort and of freedom before anything else, and this grace from God is not a prelude to the Ten words, but the first word. What a gift to us!

Yes, gift. The Commandments are not meant to be a simple checklist for our behavior; they are so much more, and every one is framed with God. The rest of the words, then, are about our response to God, our response to God's grace. We notice that there are no punishments listed: if you do this, then that punishment. Rather, our response to the words invites us into the grace of God because we have accepted these words. Now we live them out in relationship first to God, then to one another.

From here, we move to Jesus overturning tables and driving out animals and money changers from the courtyard of the Temple. This story is in all four gospels; we are meant to know of it and to remember its importance. The first three gospels place this story of Jesus in the Temple just before his trial and crucifixion, in a chronology of his journey to the cross. Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, fixed on God's will. The Temple scene is Jesus' final public act before the authorities make the decision to arrest him. In John's gospel, the Temple event takes place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, right after Jesus' first miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. John is not giving us an event of time but of theology, just as he does with

Jesus' birth story. *In the beginning was the Word.* In the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Jesus shows us that he will challenge and change the very center of our lives. John also makes Jerusalem not only the place of Jesus' death, but in Jesus' reply to the authorities, but also the place of his resurrection and ascension. The whole of Jesus' ministry is centered in this place.

Now, the Temple in Jerusalem was considered to be **the** dwelling place of the presence of God. In the courtyard of the Temple was this marketplace of purchasing animals for sacrifice, and for exchanging money to be used in the Temple. Coins of the day had Caesar's image on them and such coins were considered idolatrous and not allowed to be used in the Temple. (We're back to the Ten words.) In John Jesus does not say that the Temple is a den of robbers; rather that the house of God, "my father" has become a marketplace. (My Father's house has become a marketplace.) In Jesus' words and actions, he physically and literally positions himself as the Temple of God. From God's dwelling place, the Temple, Jesus says that he, his body, is the Temple. Such a statement is not just overturning the table of the Temple, but of dismantling the entire system. If God is housed, dwell, in Jesus, then the Temple system irrelevant. God could be anywhere! Jesus has answered any question about the location of God even before the Temple curtain is torn in two at Jesus' crucifixion. God abides in the person of Jesus.

Do you see how Jesus is upending the world? He makes an outrageous, unbelievable statement, that God, the great I AM, is in the midst of us in the flesh. Jesus shakes the foundations from the start. Our message from the Temple story is again that God is with us. That God in Jesus is absurd – and true. Our journey is to proclaim this good news wherever we are. We, too, are fundamentally, bodily changed when God is at our center, when living water is poured upon us, when God declares us God's own. We take in bread and wine, body and blood; God is in us, transforming us.

Our Lenten is part of our pilgrimage with and to God. We a season in which we intentionally ask God in prayer what in our lives needs to be dismantled, or what is irrelevant. We ask God to remove those things from us and to turn our hearts again to God. When we take away all the "stuff" of our lives, what's left is Jesus. Yes, Jesus. We walk with him through a holy Lent. Maybe daffodils and Lent do go together. In deep work of abiding with Jesus, walking with God in relationship with God and each other, there is a gift in front of us. God and "holy" are not surrounded in gloom but in outrageous, glorious color and beauty all around us. God's very creation brings us joy all along *the way*, our walk with Christ.

Welcome to a holy Lent. What a gift, what a grace.