



## Liturgical Day: The Third Sunday in Lent

Date: March 15, 2009

Sermon Title: From "Religious Rite" to "Right with God"

Cattle, sheep and doves,  
Money changers run amuck,  
Jesus: a new way.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So yesterday I was sitting at the breakfast table, with this huge newspaper completely covering the table, trying to figure out how my cup of orange juice and breakfast plate could possibly fit on the table. It just seems like the Saturday paper is so much larger than it used to be. I know some of you are accustomed to that, but I'm still trying to figure out how to read it and have a comfortable breakfast at the same time. Do you know what I mean? <sup>i</sup>

At any rate, after fussing for a few minutes, folding and rearranging, I glanced at the front page of the A section, and there it was – the lead story – page one above the fold: Lent. Under the picture of a beautiful young girl, arms crossed in prayer, was a story about the similarities between the Christian practice of Lent, and some of the changes that Americans are making during this economic downturn.

I really hadn't given that aspect of our current situation any thought, but the reporter is on to something. There are some remarkable similarities. During the season of Lent, Christians often adopt a spirit of frugality – abstaining from certain foods and pleasures, and giving the money that might have been spent on those activities to a needy cause. There is evidently a spirit of frugality sweeping our nation these days. Many people, even those whose jobs are secure, are spending less than they may have been spending a year ago. Our country has been on a 15-20 year spending spree, and it seems to be drawing to a close. It used to be that huge vehicles, expansive homes, extravagant vacations and over-the-top jewelry collections were an impressive sign of success. The motto was, "If you've got it, flaunt it." Now there is a growing consensus that just because you can, doesn't necessarily mean that you should. As the Post reporter put it, many people these days are "expressing [a] weariness of unchecked extravagance and [a] new contempt of conspicuous consumption."

It appears that the spirit of Lent has captured more than the church this time around, and I'm one who thinks that is a good thing. I would love to live in a country that is more interested in combating world hunger than owning the latest technological devices. I would love to live in a country that is more interested in promoting justice than snooping around in the private lives of Hollywood stars. I would love to live in a country that is more interested in assisting families who



FIRST LESSON  
**EXODUS 20:1-17**

PSALM  
**PSALM 19**

SECOND LESSON  
**1<sup>ST</sup> CORINTHIANS 1:18-25**

GOSPEL LESSON  
**ST. JOHN 2:13-22**

PRAYER OF THE DAY  
**HOLY GOD, THROUGH  
YOUR SON YOU HAVE  
CALLED US TO LIVE  
FAITHFULLY AND ACT  
COURAGEOUSLY. KEEP US  
STEADFAST IN YOUR  
COVENANT OF GRACE, AND  
TEACH US THE WISDOM THAT  
COMES ONLY THROUGH  
JESUS CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR  
AND LORD, WHO LIVES AND  
REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE  
HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD,  
NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.**

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**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.

<sup>i</sup> The Rocky Mountain News, Colorado's oldest newspaper, published its last edition on February 27, 2009. It was published in a tabloid format, and now Denver's largest local newspaper is the Denver Post, which is a broadsheet format paper.

don't have adequate housing or health insurance than in drinking fine wine or eating tender steak. If this economic crisis causes us all to spend a little less on ourselves and become a bit more aware of the needs in our neighbor's homes, it will make us a stronger country, and one that will have a much more positive influence on the world around us.

Yet there is a significant difference between what people are going through in our country today, and what the church promotes during the season of Lent. Lent is not a program for self-improvement. During Lent, Christians do not cut back on spending and sinning in order to become a better version of what we once were. During these forty days, we enter into the spiritual disciplines of worship, fasting, prayer, generosity and reading the Scriptures in order to re-establish the connection with God that is broken when we become consumed by less important interests. Lent is a time when we try to let these lesser pleasures take a more peripheral role in our lives. Lent is a time when we seek to give God a more central role in our living. Lent is a time when we open up our hearts to the reality of God's grace, and welcome the transforming affect it can have on us.

That is what really lies at the heart of this morning's Gospel text. John provides for us, this morning, a very surprising image of Jesus. We like our Jesus to be loving and comforting. We like to think of him as encouraging us, and empowering us to be agents of good in the world. Here, he seems to be just the opposite. He is offended. He is angry. He is destructive. John pictures him in a way that is so startling, we find ourselves asking, "What is it that disturbed him so deeply?" "What could possibly have caused this outburst?"

Often times a close look at what is in one of these Gospel lessons reveals what is really taking place. In this instance, a close look at what isn't here says even more. Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell the same story. In their accounts, as Jesus chases the merchants out, he accuses them with these words: "You have made my father's house a den of thieves."<sup>ii</sup> These other three evangelists present Jesus as being offended at the unethical behavior of these merchants. He chases them out of the Temple because they are taking advantage of God's people. But not John. He omits these words, and has Jesus simply say, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" In John's version of this story, Jesus isn't disturbed by unethical behavior. He is more upset that his Father's house, a place that should have been a place of prayer and a place of learning, has become a marketplace. The focus is on the buying and selling of sacrificial animals. The focus is on the mechanics of sacrifices and ritual behavior. A sacred place, that should have been a place of grace and new life, had become a house of commerce – where the only relief worshippers could get from God's anger is based on whatever they could afford to sacrifice on the altar.

Jesus wants so much more for them. It isn't that he is against commerce. It isn't even that he is against commerce in the Temple court. To say this text proves that Jesus is offended whenever there is something for sale in the Narthex of a church would be to over-reach. The problem is that their focus has shifted. For the first century worshipper, animal sacrifice is no longer an expression of the remorse they have about their sinfulness, and an entreaty to God for forgiveness and a new start. It has just become what they do. They do it because they are supposed to. They do it because the religious leaders command them to. They do it because that is what religious people do. And Jesus wants so much more for them. He wants them to have a new and living relationship with God. He wants them to know the grace of God that totally transforms lives.

He wants so much more for us, too, and that is why the church promotes the season of Lent every year. It is a season when we admit that there is nothing we can do to make ourselves right. No amount of animal sacrifice or good, human intention is enough to heal our relationship with God – a relationship that is damaged every time that you and I sin, and turn away from what God wants for us. During this season, we strive to be a bit more aware of that, in order to become a bit more grateful for what God has done on our behalf. In Jesus Christ, God offers us the gift of forgiveness, and an entire new beginning. God invites us to die to the illusion that we can save ourselves. God invites us to live in the shadow of an astounding grace. That is the new relationship God wants to have with us – a new relationship that the season of Lent invites us to experience.

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<sup>i</sup> See Matthew 21.12–17, Mark 11.15–19, and Luke 19.45–48.

It's true: people in our time who feel pressed by the economy are making a number of changes in how they live, and in some ways their choices sound a lot like the choices you and I choose to make during the season of Lent. But as we do so, let us always remember the goal of our Lenten observance. Not that we might become more impressed with ourselves and with our relationships. But that we might become ever more aware of our shortcomings, and ever more grateful for our God's abundant grace.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (March 15, 2009)

Gospel Lesson; English Text:

<sup>2:13</sup> The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. <sup>15</sup> Making 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. <sup>16</sup> He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" <sup>17</sup> His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." <sup>18</sup> The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" <sup>19</sup> Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." <sup>20</sup> The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" <sup>21</sup> But he was speaking of the temple of his body. <sup>22</sup> After 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. <sup>iii</sup>

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

<sup>2:13</sup> Καὶ ἐγγὺς ἦν τὸ πάσχα τῶν Ἰουδαίων, καὶ ἀνέβη εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα ὁ Ἰησοῦς. <sup>14</sup> Καὶ εὗρεν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ τοὺς πωλοῦντας βόας καὶ πρόβατα καὶ περιστερὰς καὶ τοὺς κερματιστὰς καθημένους, <sup>15</sup> καὶ ποιήσας φραγέλλιον ἐκ σχοινίων πάντας ἐξέβαλεν ἐκ τοῦ ἱεροῦ τὰ τε πρόβατα καὶ τοὺς βόας, καὶ τῶν κολλυβιστῶν ἐξέχεεν τὸ κέρμα καὶ τὰς τραπέζας ἀνέτρεψεν, <sup>16</sup> καὶ τοῖς τὰς περιστερὰς πωλοῦσιν εἶπεν ῥατε ταῦτα ἐντεῦθεν, μὴ ποιεῖτε τὸν οἶκον τοῦ πατρὸς μου οἶκον ἐμπορίου. <sup>17</sup> ἐμνήσθησαν οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ τι γεγραμμένον ἐστὶν ὁ ζῆλος τοῦ οἴκου σου καταφάγεται με. <sup>18</sup> Ἀπεκρίθησαν οὖν οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ εἶπαν αὐτῷ τί σημεῖον δεικνύεις ἡμῖν τι ταῦτα ποιεῖς; <sup>19</sup> ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς λύσατε τὸν ναὸν τοῦτον καὶ ἐν τρισὶν ἡμέραις ἐγερῶ αὐτόν. <sup>20</sup> εἶπαν οὖν οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι τεσσαράκοντα καὶ ἕξ τεσιν οἰκοδομήθη ὁ ναὸς οὗτος, καὶ σὺ ἐν τρισὶν ἡμέραις ἐγερεῖς αὐτόν; <sup>21</sup> ἐκεῖνος δὲ λεγεν περὶ τοῦ ναοῦ τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ. <sup>22</sup> ὅτε οὖν ἠγέρθη ἐκ νεκρῶν, ἐμνήσθησαν οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ τι τοῦτο λεγεν, καὶ ἐπίστευσαν τῇ γραφῇ καὶ τῷ λόγῳ ἃν εἶπεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς. <sup>iv</sup>

<sup>iii</sup> St. John 2:13-22, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

<sup>iv</sup> St. John 2:13-22, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).