

Lent 3 B
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AJH+

“Jesus went up to Jerusalem.”

Today is a significant day in our common life. There, we got that understatement of all understatements out of the way.

For fifty-two Sundays, we have wandered in the wilderness of Sunday worship gatherings that took place only online, with a limited few gathered here to broadcast to the scattered assembly. For a whole year, since the second Sunday in Lent, 2020, these pews have remained vacant on Sunday mornings, no doubt the longest period in their more than century long history of seating God’s people gathered for prayer.

It is good to be back together, in this space.

Today, only a small portion from our congregation, some fifty people, will gather in this hallowed hall for worship, but that is significant, nonetheless. Our life together has been forever altered and newly shaped by the events of the past year, but our witness – Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again – is unshaken.

A sense of place is significant in the faith journey. To be sure, we profess God is present in all times, all circumstances, in all settings, and among all people. But, for Christians, as for our siblings in the many faith traditions of our world, there are particular locations that become especially sacred, intimately tied to our connection with the divine.

The smells, the sounds, the tastes that we associate with these sacred places, St. Mary of the Hills and others, over time, all become enshrined in our DNA, central to our understanding of God and of ourselves. This was true of the Jerusalem Temple for Jesus and his first century Jewish companions.

The Gospel writer, John, provides a pretty vivid image of first century Jerusalem – Temple courts filled activity. In particular, he draws attention to two – the money changers and those selling cattle, sheep, and dove.

Remember your Old Testament/Hebrew Bible education here – the people of God, travelling to house of God, needed to make an offering, whether a gift of thanksgiving or a reparation for sin. The books of the Law, Deuteronomy and Leviticus, in particular, go into great detail about which sacrifices were to be offered for which occasion.

Those who sold in the Temple marketplace were not only offering a necessary service, they were also known to turn a hefty profit by marking up the cost of these essential items for the ritual sacrifice. But that was not all; there was another problem.

The Temple dealt in its own currency, not coinage of the empire. The faithful who had traveled to Jerusalem, some of them many days and nights of hard walking, seeking only to set their relationship with God aright, now found themselves at the mercy of opportunistic and predatory money changers. Pilgrims quickly discovered exchange rates were inconsistent and always included a significant markup to benefit the money changer.

As Jesus enters the Temple courts, likely for the first time in years and perhaps for the first time as an adult, he is appalled at what he sees. The holy habitation of God's dwelling is not a place of divine encounter but a corrupted corner of economic opportunity and ruin.

Imagine the dismay. It is as if you, upon entering this place today, discovered at ATM, with a 'small' service fee to withdraw sacred currency to purchase your communion bread and a bulletin with only a 'meager' markup. I'd hope that one of you would turn over a couple of tables as well.

This is the scene that Jesus discovers in the sacred space where he was dutifully presented by his parents as a firstborn before the Lord. This was the scene when the blinders were removed and Jesus saw what had become of the courts where he once sat as a youth among wise elders and proclaimed the wisdom of God.

Jesus' reaction, then, is not only warranted, it is also to be expected.

What are we to make of this, a people thrilled by the new day breaking forth in our midst, when, at long last, we are once again beginning to gather in the beloved sacred space of St. Mary's? Two thoughts, deeply connected to one another...

First, might we remember and hold close what we have learned over the course of the past year – this space, sacred though it may be, is fleeting. It is not the only place where God dwells. To be sure, it is important, central even, to our understanding and practice of the Christian life. But it is not the end.

Jesus foretold the destruction of the Temple, an illustration with a double meaning – both he and the building in which he stands will soon be crushed. The one that is raised up again, in three days, is the sign of the one that will last.

The resurrected life and love of Christ lasts, even amidst a world where foundations crack, wood rots, and viruses conquer the patterns of our common life. When all else fades, whatever the circumstance, season, or location, remember that which sustained the disciples – Christ resurrected, alive and present wherever we may go.

And, secondly, because we are alive in this world and filled by the resurrected life and of love of Christ, let us remain vigilant for those places of injustice, where God's people are being taken advantage of and oppressed by others, sometimes in the very name of God we profess. The life of the resurrected Christ offers us a lens of love through which to view God's good world, eyes to see the places of hurt, harm and heartache in our midst.

In response, may we never be afraid to follow in the way of our Jesus, turning over a few tables, when necessary, in the name of the justice of God.

Even as we gather this morning, dear friends, many remain in their homes. Our wilderness journey, in the season of Lent and in the reality of this pandemic, is not complete. After many long months, the doors of this sanctuary are once again opened, but the love of God never ceased. Go, embody that love, in this, God's good world. Amen.