

Journey through Lent

Third Sunday of Lent • March 7, 2021

Opening Prayer

Light a candle. Open your Bible and set it beside the lit candle. Prepare the room for prayer, even if you are alone. Quiet music can help to settle yourself and others even if it has been a hectic day.

Leader: + In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Let us be silent for a moment to prepare to hear the word of God.

All: Come, Holy Spirit.

Open our minds and our hearts to your word revealed in Sacred Scripture.

Leader: Jesus, you are truly Savior of the world.

Give us zeal to live a committed life patterned on yours.

All: God, help us to keep the promises we have made to you and Jesus.

Amen.

Insights on the Readings

Rotate around the circle, having each person read a paragraph/bullet point aloud. For each reading, begin with the bullet points and then continue on to reading the passage from a Bible.

First Reading (Exodus 20:1-17)

- ▶ This is the story of God giving Moses and the people his law.
- ▶ The Ten Commandments narrated in the passage are the ethical and moral principles and behaviors that will form the Israelites into God's people, practicing justice and mercy.

Second Reading (1 Corinthians 1:22-25)

- ▶ In this passage, Paul informs the Corinthian church that for Jews and Greeks a crucified messiah makes no sense.
- ▶ Paul then proclaims that what looks foolish to some, namely crucifixion, is in reality the wisdom of God who converts the foolishness of the cross into real strength.

Gospel Reading (John 2:13-25)

- ▶ This is the story of Jesus driving the vendors and money changers out of the temple.

Reflections

Lent: A time to keep your word

In the first reading, the Ten Commandments are presented as the basic conditions for covenant membership with God and the people. They are words of commitment to the promises of God and to the quality of relationships people have with one another. The commandments are ethical forms of behavior, binding those who are members of the covenant community to God and to one another. The people promise to keep their word to God.

When we embrace a faith lifestyle based on the ten commandments, we commit ourselves to have God as our God, not our work or our culture. We promise to take time out for God. That is what Sabbath is all about, for if we always work and never stop and reflect, we cannot nurture our relationship with God, with one another, and with creation. We care for and respect the elderly, for they have nurtured us in the faith tradition. We do not kill, for we realize that we are all made in God's image and likeness and that to kill another human being is to kill a piece of God. We do not adulterate our human relationships or our faith. We respect the property of all and refrain from stealing. We do not go around falsifying our witness to one another or coveting each other's property or their loving and committed relationships. The purpose of the commandments is to give the Israelites and all of us a picture of what living in covenantal connectedness looks like. In sum, the commandments challenge us to a life in which there is honor and respect within families and among neighbors, and where God is revered and obeyed through attentive listening and humble response.

Background on the Gospel Reading

This week we depart from the Year B readings from the Gospel of Mark for the Gospel of John. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus' cleansing of the temple is placed immediately after his Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem. John places the event early in the Gospel, following Jesus' first sign at Cana. This is because in the fourth Gospel, Jesus makes several trips to the holy city of Jerusalem, whereas in the synoptic Gospels, he makes only one climactic journey there.

Since the Temple is the focus of the Gospel reading, some background is in order. At the time of Jesus, everyone – even pilgrims – were expected to make a donation for the Temple's upkeep. People carried Roman coins which often bore the image of the emperor and the goddess Roma. The priests considered this currency "unclean." So the people had to exchange their money into Jewish temple coins in order to make their temple donation. The outer courts of the temple precincts were lined with the tables of money changers who charged exorbitant exchange fees. In addition, visitors to the temple who wanted to have an animal sacrifice offered on the altar of the temple would often have to pay higher prices than the going market rate for blemish-free animals purchased inside the temple. This enraged Jesus, who considered this an exploitation of the faithful in the name of God. In response, he toppled the money changers and vendor booths and tables.

Lent: A Time To Learn from an Angry Jesus

We often image Jesus as meek and humble of heart. We believe he was non-violent. After all, he told his disciples to turn the other cheek. We are startled by Jesus' actions. Jesus comes across as Indiana Jones with whip in hand. He is downright angry. Jesus lunges through the temple with a whip in his hand, driving out animals, turning over the moneychangers' tables, spilling thousands of coins all over

the place and yelling at the top of his lungs: Get out of here! You are turning my Father's house into a shopping mall, not a place of prayer. Jesus knew what it means to be angry. It is that natural human emotion that boils up in our veins whenever we meet injustice and hypocrisy. This kind of anger is natural and keeps us from despair. Such anger can be the doorway to hope, for it responds to what must not be and cannot be. This is the kind of anger Jesus felt that day in the Temple. After all, he went to the Temple to pray, not to shop. Jesus' anger compels him to act to restore the temple to what it was intended to be: a house of prayer for all people.

Jesus' anger that day brought to fruition the prophecies of Zechariah and Jeremiah who maintained that in the days of the Messiah all will be holy in Jerusalem and no merchant will be found in the Temple. That's why Jesus' opponents were so upset with him, demanding, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus' response seems absurd to his opponents. "Destroy this temple [Jesus' body] and in three days I will raise it up." His listeners, especially those who are his opponents, are thinking pragmatically, devoid of faith. After all, it took forty-six years to build the Temple building and he is going to destroy it and build it up in three days? Jesus' answer is laden with resurrection clues and images which his disciples and believers will remember after Jesus' death and resurrection. They will put the pieces together then. What happens to Jesus' body happens to the body of Christ, the temple of God now—in us, individually and collectively. Thus, Jesus' driving out the merchants and money changers from the Temple is an action that displays for us what ought to be our priority: a worshiping relationship to God and a just relationship with each other.

Lent: A Time of Zeal For God

Jesus was zealous in defending God's house as a place of prayer. Jesus' disciples recall the words of Psalm 69: "Zeal for your house will consume me." We are meant to hear a double meaning: Jesus' own zeal for his Father's house will consume him and the religious authorities' misguided zeal will bring about his death.

The Gospel reading challenges us with a myriad of questions. For what or whom are we zealous? Are we zealous for God's house, for the public worship of God, and for God's honor and glory?

What really consumes us—time, work, money, worries, sports, children, acquiring things, marriage, health?

Jesus spoke of the Temple as his body. How do we treat the temple of our bodies, the temple of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us? How do we treat the bodies of others: spouses, the elderly, the sick, the homeless, our enemies? Lent is a time to embrace the twofold challenge from the Gospel reading. First, we need to pay attention to the anger that lurks in us and not let it fester like a sore or let it explode into violence. Second, we are to practice the virtue of zeal for God so that it can consume us as it did Jesus.

For Reflection

1. Describe how you feel when a person does not keep his or her word after promising you that they would.
2. How do you keep your word to God, fellow family members, co-workers, and others?
3. How can you spend the next week practicing zeal for God? Would becoming more zealous in the way you pray and worship help?

Closing Prayer

Leader: Lord, help us to be zealous in our love for you,

All: By loving one another as you loved us.

Leader: Lord, help us to be zealous in the care of our bodies,

All: By eating healthy foods and regular exercise.

Leader: Lord, help us to be zealous in developing our faith and practicing it.

**All: By observing our Lenten practices of fasting, praying, and almsgiving.
Amen.**

Pray together the Our Father, then exchange a gesture of peace with all who are present.

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