

7 March 2021  
The Third Sunday in Lent

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Cleansing Our Temples”

Text: John 2:13-25; Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

If Jesus were here today, what would He do? How would He cleanse His Temple? Assuming it needs cleansing . . . Or are we good? Are we better than they were then? I mean, we're not selling things, no money exchange here . . .

Well, *don't answer that!* Not yet, anyway. We'll get to it. First, though, we need to realize something about Temples in the Scriptures. And that is: there are three Temples, or three kinds of Temples, in Scripture.

The **first** is the building itself. The Temple made of stone in Jerusalem. The one Jesus went into in today's reading. It was big. It was impressive. But what was even bigger and more impressive is what happened there. For there God dwelt with His people. And for His people. There was the blood of atonement for their sins. There was the forgiveness they needed. There, and no place else. Only there, God said, will I put my Name.

So the Temple was a big deal. It was a big deal to Israel when it was just a tent being carried around the wilderness. It was a big deal when Solomon built it permanently in Jerusalem after Israel settled in the Promised Land. It was a big deal when the Babylonians came in and leveled it. And it was a big deal when the people came back from their exile in Babylon and tried to rebuild it, and then when King Herod finished the job, and made it bigger and more magnificent than even Solomon had. That was the 46 years referred to by the Jews. It was *finally* back to where it should be! And now this rube comes in and starts overturning tables and talking about destroying it! Get out of here!

But to Jesus, it wasn't the size of the Temple or how fancy it was that made it magnificent. It was God's presence there. And what took place there. God was perfectly happy with a tent! He didn't need big and fancy. In fact, a big, fancy, eye-candy Temple led to idolatry. It happened before with Solomon's Temple, and it was happening again. The building overshadowed what was happening there. And so what happened there began to change. From prayer and atonement to commerce.

And what made it even worse was that when Jesus went to the Temple that day, *it was the Passover* - a high holy day. The day they would remember the exodus and participate

in it through the Passover meal. A day to remember, a day to pray, a day of thanksgiving. Going to the Temple shouldn't be like going to the Farmer's Market! But the *what* they were doing wasn't wrong - there's a place for commerce. It was the *where*. Not in God's house. Not in God's Name.

So Jesus, consumed with zeal for what *should* be happening there, consumed with zeal for prayer and atonement, drives them out. Render to commerce the things of commerce and to God the things of God. So with *a whip of cords*, He drove them out.

So, properly chastised, did they just go away? Well, no. I'll bet they were back the next day, probably with some guards to protect them. But even before that, they challenge Jesus. What gives you the right to do these things? Show us a paper. Give us a sign. Otherwise *you're* the wrongdoer here, not us!

OK. You want a sign? *Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*. Yeah, now we know He's out of His mind! There's the proof! Three days! He's crazy. And worse, He's *dangerous*.

Now at this point, John adds the comment that, of course, Jesus wasn't talking about the stones, but about His body. Which leads us to the **second** Temple - or kind of Temple - spoken of in Scripture: **Jesus Himself**. John had spoken of this Temple when He spoke of Jesus' birth, saying: *the Word became flesh and dwelt*, or tabernacled, or tented, *among us* (John 1:14). The flesh and blood of Jesus was the new place of God dwelling with man. Which means the flesh and blood of Jesus **is the new place of atonement**. *His* Passover from death to life is what the old Passover pointed to. *He* was the Lamb. It would be *His* blood poured out for our deliverance. And so He would. He would pour out His blood. He would die. He would rise. And in so doing, He would fulfill the purpose for the stone Temple, making it obsolete - no matter how big and beautiful it was.

Which is why He used *a whip of cords* to drive out the money-changers and animal sellers that day. He probably could have done that without a whip, but this, too, was a sign. For a whip - and worse - would soon be used *on Him*, on the Temple of His *body*, at the instigation of these same Jews, to, they thought, cleanse their nation of this lunatic. And they were just as zealous as Jesus was that day. But how very different, too. They did it to maintain their life. Jesus to give them a new one. They did it to maintain the status quo. Jesus because the status quo wasn't enough. For Jesus came to give what no amount of silver or gold could ever buy. And to provide a place of atonement that would last forever.

So they, it turns out, destroy the Temple. They hung Him on the cross. They sealed Him in the tomb. And while Jesus was accomplishing the NEW Passover, they were celebrating the old one. They thought they saved the nation, but it was really Jesus who did. And who saved not the nation, but the world, when He did, in fact, rebuild the

Temple they destroyed three days later in His resurrection.

The disciples remembered this, John tells us, after Jesus had accomplished everything, when Jesus sent them the Holy Spirit to help them; to bring all these things to their remembrance (John 16:4). Which brings us to the **third** Temple - or kind of Temple - spoken of in Scripture: **you**. For as Saint Paul says: *Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God* (2 Corinthians 6:19)?

So now, with that in mind, I want to circle back and ask you the question I asked at the beginning of the sermon today . . .

*If Jesus were here today, what would He do? How would He cleanse His Temple? Assuming it needs cleansing . . . Or are we good?*

If you formed an answer in your mind when I first asked that, perhaps now you have a different answer? For it is not the **first** kind of Temple, a building, of stone, that needs cleansing today. And it is not the **second** kind of Temple, Jesus' flesh and blood, that needs cleansing today. That was cleansed. For while Jesus took our sin and guilt, our filth and sinful grime upon Himself, He atoned for it all; paid the price for it all with His suffering and death. But that **third** kind of Temple . . . you and me . . . yeah, we need cleansing, don't we? And this, too, Jesus does.

First, He does so by overturning the sin in our hearts. John wrote that Jesus *knows what is in man*, what is in you and I, and indeed He does. Every sinful thought, word, deed, and desire. *He knows*. Every sin of omission and commission - that is, what you've done and what you've failed to do. *He knows*. All those sins that no one knows but you, and all those sins that you've done that you don't even realize! *He knows*. The sins you dismiss because, well, everyone does them! The sins you wink at and trivialize. The sins that are accepted in the world today - even encouraged - and well, we don't want to rock the boat. He knows what's in your heart. All of it! Or, as Jesus would later put it: *For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness* (Mark 7:21-22). So yeah, more than a little cleansing needed!

So Jesus overturns the sin in our hearts, not with a whip of ten cords, but *with a whip of ten commandments*. Ten Commandments that show us how our faith in God and our love for our neighbor has failed. Ten Commandments that show us how we've idolized what we have rather than worship the giver of those things. Ten Commandments that show us those *parts* of our lives and those *times* in our lives that we want to keep for ourselves and not let God in. You can have these other parts and times, God, but this - this time, this place, this sin - no. But Jesus, just as zealous for you as He was for the Temple that day, won't have it. He will overturn the sin in every nook and cranny of your heart, that it be a place for Him. For Him to dwell. For Him to save.

And He did. For that He knows all your sin means He died for all your sin. His Temple for your Temple. His blood for your atonement. His death and resurrection your Passover from death to life. Your hearts cleansed when His blood is poured over you in Baptism, poured into your ears in Absolution, and poured into your mouths in the Supper. And in cleansing you, this too: **giving you His Spirit to dwell in you**. That your hearts be that Temple, where He now dwells to sanctify you; to holy you. For Jesus took the nails, the spear, the whip, the shame, the suffering, the death you deserved, and gave you the new life you need. The new life that you'd be lost without.

So no wonder Paul would be so adamant! ***We preach Christ crucified!*** People then and now ***demand signs***, Paul says. Something spectacular to see and marvel at. Miracles, success, glory, riches. *Then we'll believe*. And people then and now ***seek wisdom***, the spectacular not for the eyes but for the ears. But the same idea. Ideas, theories, philosophies, new systems and paradigms. *Then we'll believe*. But, Paul says, those things can't save you. Those things can't give you life. Only Christ crucified can. For while many look at Christ crucified and see folly, it is really wisdom. While many look at Christ crucified and see weakness, it is really strength. And to think we can do better, we can come up with something better, that is the height of foolishness. So no. We will ***preach Christ crucified***. And we'll boast only of Him.

And that's especially what this season of Lent is all about: that our God, in His Son, has come to cleanse us. In the Temple of His body, to cleanse the Temple of our hearts. That He dwell with us and we with Him. That His life be our life and that we live not for the things of this world, but for Him. For the things of this world come and go - buildings, riches, honors, nations, power, success. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away (Job 1:21). In fact, there is only one thing He won't: His Son and His forgiveness and His zeal to save you. That's for now and for ever.

So this season of Lent bids us again to look at our hearts and the entanglements of sin that have grown there again. What have we let in? What have we followed? How have we turned away? What are we living for? What signs have we looked for, and to? What wisdom have we exalted over God's Word? How have we thought ourselves strong and wise and God foolish and weak? How have we polluted the Temple of our hearts?

But to us now comes our Lord, our Jesus. To cleanse us. To heal us. To raise us to that new life we need. And we come to Him now, opening our mouths in repentance and then opening them in faith to eat and drink the flesh and blood of our Passover Lamb. And in this eating and drinking, participate in His exodus, receive His freeing forgiveness, and proclaim Christ crucified. For as Saint Paul would also say: *as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes* (1 Corinthians 11:26). That is what we need. That is what the world needs. Now more than ever? Maybe. But really, now *the same* as ever. That we have hope. That we have *more* than the status quo. That

we and our lives be cleansed, and holy, and eternal.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.