



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MARCH 11, 2012
THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22
Driven into the Wilderness: For the Love of God

When I think about the kind of people who would have gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover, I do not think of wealthy merchants, Jewish aristocracy, or exalted religious leaders. I imagine the hardworking shop owners, tradesmen, farmers, and their families who traveled long distances to get to Jerusalem as part of their spiritual quest in life. I can't help but think that somewhere in that crowd there would be someone like Tevye, the poor dairyman of *Fiddler on the Roof* fame. Tevye, had he ever made it from early twentieth century Czarist Russia to first century Jerusalem, would have fit perfectly into the scene we just read. With his bad luck, Tevye would have been the person in line at the money changers' table who had just handed over his money to the dove sellers and was ready to take his two turtle doves to make sacrifice. Suddenly Jesus would come storming in, upset the tables, send merchants and animals scattering with the crack of a whip, and leave Tevye without his money or his sacrifice. When the dust had settled, I imagine him standing with his hands lifted to heaven complaining, "Would it spoil some vast eternal plan, had you waited just a minute to send this crazy man?"

Tevye is not a theologian. In the musical, he is a frustrated and poor dairyman with five daughters, all of whom are just as headstrong as he. Yet Tevye ponders some good questions like what is God's role in our daily lives, why do bad things happen to decent people, and could not God send a little help our way? Through humor, history, and hardship, this wonderful drama makes us think about the ways God loves us and how should we love God in return. Ultimately it helps us to realize that how we love one another says something about how we love God. Tevye is not a trained theologian, but anyone who seeks to understand God a little better is, in essence, practicing theology.

Whether or not his timing was good, Jesus did show up at the temple brandishing a homemade whip and drive out the moneychangers and others who were making a mockery of the temple and worship. We are surprised by his violent reaction to what was a common and longstanding practice at the temple. We tend to think of Jesus as meek and mild, but to appreciate his

actions we have to understand the importance of worship in the life of the Hebrew people. The worship of God is central for Jews—as it is for Christians. One of the primary messages God communicated to his people when they were camped at Sinai and Moses brought the tablets down the mountain was that the worship of God is first and foremost a desire and responsibility of the Hebrew people.

By the time the Israelites reached Sinai, they had already been wandering in the desert for some time. They had suffered hunger, thirst and attacks from various hostile neighbors. They were frustrated and afraid, but at each turn God had taken care of them. God provided food and water and physical protection on their journey. It is clear that God was leading them in a certain direction and Sinai was their first destination.

As they camped at Sinai, Moses went up onto the mountain to meet with God. He was gone a long time—forty days and forty nights—we are told. When he returned, he brought with him two stone tablets on which were written the Ten Words—or Ten Commandments as we know them. There at Sinai, God wanted to enter into a covenant with his people, much as a king might enter into a covenant with his subjects. Such covenants had three distinct parts: the king would state what he had done for his people, he would tell them what they must do in obedience to him, and he would promise rewards for their obedience. What took place at Sinai fits perfectly into this pattern.

As we read earlier, the covenant begins with these words, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them”

God reminds the people that he has delivered them from slavery and the harsh treatment of the Egyptians. God states clearly that he expects their loyalty and devotion in return lived out through the Ten Commandments. And God promises his steadfast love for endless generations and long life for the faithful if they remain true to the covenant. By entering into this covenant with God, the Hebrew people established their life and culture for untold generations.

Some scholars see distinctions among the Ten Commandments and suggest that the first section refers to our love for and worship of God while the second section deals with our relationships with one another. In reality, as Elizabeth Webb points out, the priority of worship and the attention to human relationships are intertwined. Neither trumps the other.¹ This covenant was surely uppermost in Jesus' mind when he approached the temple for worship.

As John tells the story, Jesus is fresh from the wilderness when he arrives in Jerusalem. The other three gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—tell this story at the end of their gospels, during the week of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. Why would John change the time of the story so drastically? Apparently he wanted Jesus to confront the religious powers-that-be early on so that his ministry would reflect these values from the beginning. The problem was that there was collusion between the Jewish leaders of his day and the Roman authorities. The Romans controlled just about everything Jewish which included arrangements at the temple like changing money and purchasing animals for sacrifice. These scams essentially made a mockery of worship and the ways in which sincere worshipers were cheated violated the heart of the commandments which link fair treatment of fellow human beings with worship of the Creator-Father. It is no wonder that Jesus reacted with such anger. If people who camped out at the temple would treat their fellow Hebrews in this manner, how could they worship God with a clean heart?

I find it clever that the same action which described how Jesus was “driven” into the wilderness following his baptism is the same action which describes how Jesus sought to purify worship and set right relationships among people. The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness so that he could get his head and heart properly oriented in order to take up his ministry. Jesus drove the money changers and those who hawked animals for sacrifice out of the temple in order to properly reorient worship so that the people would focus on fulfilling the covenant by loving God and neighbor.

Marilyn Salmon reminds us that in John's gospel, this trip to Jerusalem is the first of three pilgrimages Jesus makes to the holy city. It is the second “sign” of Jesus' divinity after his turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. Through various stories, John makes it clear that Jesus has

¹Elizabeth Webb, “Commentary on Exodus 20:1-17,” *WorkingPreacher.org*; available online at: <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?tab=1&alt=1>.

some authority over nature²: he can change the characteristics of water, he can calm storms, he can walk on water. But Jesus also has authority over humans and can address what he considers to be right or wrong behavior.

Temple worship—as with worship today—was about understanding clearly that God is the only god and is worthy of our undivided attention and unfettered devotion. Therefore it is not the sacrifice of an animal that gets God’s attention; rather, it is the sacrifice of an open heart that pleases God. In the same way, God despises the ways in which we take advantage of one another. Exploitation is an abomination to God and must be dealt with quickly and completely.

The Letter of First John states, “Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (I John 4:20-21).

Sometimes the Lenten season can be like the covenant ceremony at Sinai, an opportunity to renew our understanding of God as our heavenly Parent, our Provider, and Protector. These forty days are an opportunity to reflect on God’s goodness to us and the ways in which we need to respond in faithfulness to God. On the other hand (as Tevye would say), Lent can also be a startling time when we are fully confronted with what it means to love God. As we begin to see our world through God’s eyes, we cannot overlook the exploitation, the oppression, the abuse, and hurt that so many people suffer at the hands of fellow humans. God delivered his people from their harsh life in Egypt as a sign that no one ought to suffer abuse from another person.

We do not have to look far, however, to see what has been called “man’s inhumanity against man.” Governmental abuse such as we see today in Syria snatches not only freedom but life itself from people. The greed of a few can decimate life for many as we have seen in the ongoing economic struggle throughout the world. And we all know the ways in which life can be drained of all joy because of bias and prejudice.

²Marilyn Salmon, “Commentary on John 2:3-22, *WorkingPreacher.org*; available online at: <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?tab=4&alt=1>.

Sometimes the quiet and routine of our worship needs to be disturbed by the crack of God's demand for righteousness and justice. Sometimes we have to be reminded that love of God is not merely a warm and fuzzy feeling of comfort and security for us. Sometimes the love of God manifests itself in acts of righteousness and justice that demand fair and humane treatment for all people, that upend our traditions that are based upon prejudice, and even topple governments that choose to demean human dignity and extinguish human life rather than celebrate our diversity and encourage our God-given uniqueness. If we are to truly love God, then we must truly love one another—as difficult as that may be at times.

Tevye learned some difficult lessons about God and God's control over how we treat one another. He also learned that God creates us with minds and hearts that are intended to be free to think and choose, to commit and to live. Tevye discovered that tradition is not always of God's choosing but love always is. The people gathered at Sinai discovered that God's love is overarching and unflinching. And the people in the temple area discovered that God will not tolerate abuse and mistreatment of his people. During this season of Lent, as we are driven to think seriously about our faith, may we discover that what we do for one another we do for the love of God. Amen.

March 11, 2012

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God of healing and mercy, we bring our prayers to you today and every day, knowing that you will be faithful to the promises you have made to be present with us and to sustain us through all of the circumstances of our lives. Some of us come today feeling strong and confident, and some more fragile, but we have the assurance that in our strength and our weakness, your Spirit heals us in ways we do not understand and cannot imagine. We rely on your power in our times of need. We depend on you for comfort and hope. We may find ourselves hindered by pride, paralyzed by fear, crippled by addiction, suffering from self-inflicted wounds or hurt by the choices of others. Whatever our need, we are grateful that you offer the grace of your Spirit, of loving family and friends who will stand with us, of faithful companions whose example and love provide support, of trusted mentors who will lead us to you. For these and all of your good gifts, we offer our prayers of thanksgiving and praise.

And we also come now, O God, to pray for others throughout our community and beyond who are in need of restoration and hope. May we be present with those who are sad or lonely, reminding them that you do not despise a broken heart but welcome its tears. May we offer consolation to those who live in fear, giving witness to the good news of your grace for the most vulnerable among us. May we attend generously and compassionately to the needs of those whose bodies and minds ache for healing and peace, sharing your powerful word of redemption and wholeness. May we profess to all who long to hear it our trust in your touch of mercy that will ease our pain, in your Spirit that will inspire us to care for one another, in your power that supports us in our crushing sorrows and dances with us in our joyful triumphs. In the name of the One on whose steady love we depend and whose mercies never fail, even Jesus the Christ, we pray. Amen.

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