Sermon March 4, 2018

John 2:13-22

Jesus cleanses the Temple

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Here’s an idea of what it would have been like to participate in the yearly Passover pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem, during the time of our gospel reading.

You and your family would most likely have traveled many miles, probably on foot, from your small village on the outskirts of the city.

If you lived close by you’d have brought with you an unblemished bull/lamb/goat/or even doves. These would be taken by the Temple priests and offered up in sacrifice. This was the only way to receive atonement – through the sacrifice of an unblemished animal.

If you couldn’t bring an animal to sacrifice, you’d have to purchase one at the Temple. So when you finally reach the Temple grounds, you would first have your money (shekels, Roman coins) exchanged for Temple money, Tyrian coins. This was the only money accepted in the Temple.

Then you would go to the merchant to purchase your animal. The cost of each type of animal varied, depending on who was doing the selling.

You were dependent upon the merchants and the money exchangers to be honest.

In reality, you probably were asked to pay much more than the animal was worth, and you would not have received the proper exchange rate for your coins.

The Temple, at the time of Jesus’ ministry, had become a marketplace, over run by unscrupulous merchants. The Temple also became a haven for bandits and thieves, who came to the Temple in search of sanctuary. All in all, it was less a pilgrimage of prayer than it was an ordeal to be ended as soon as possible. The Temple had become a place for commerce.

And what was being brokered was atonement. People offered sacrifices to God in return for atonement from their sins. This was the law written in the Torah. This was the only way to receive forgiveness. You would offer to the Temple priest your unblemished animal, he would sacrifice it to God, and this would be your way of attaining forgiveness.

When the whole process became corrupt, those seeking to offer sacrifices for forgiveness or thanksgiving ended up being taken advantage of by the very people entrusted with carrying out the process.

What if this process was the only way you could ask God for forgiveness? The only way you could clear your conscience, the only way you could begin anew.

I imagine you would have questioned your relationship with God. Maybe go so far as to turn your back on Him altogether.

Fortunately, there is a better way.

The chief actions we focus on during Lent are finding ways we can deepen our relationship with God. Reflecting on our daily lives in prayer, setting new goals for our selves with regard to our spiritual life, and generally taking the steps needed that bring us closer to accepting Christ’s words of healing and grace.

It is a process designed to be between you and God, listening for the Spirit’s guidance, being open to new directions in faith.

This process does not require animal sacrifice, but it does require us to bring our selves (all that we are) to God.

When Jesus strode into the Temple that day, brandishing a whip to drive out the animals, overturning the tables of the treasurers, he was cleansing the Temple of the corruption that had taken over God’s house of prayer. He was closing down the process for good; the process that was designed by God to bring people closer to Him but which became an abomination.

By his actions in the Temple Jesus was instituting a new way for God’s people to offer thanksgiving for what He has done for them and to receive forgiveness from sin. And this new way was very simple - belief in him as Lord and Savior.

The cleansing of the Temple was the first step. His sacrificing his life on the cross was the final act. From that point on no longer did those seeking forgiveness need to go through an intermediary, no longer did they need the right currency or have at the ready the perfect sacrificial animal, all they needed, all we need is to bring our selves, our cares, our sorrows, our joys, to him.

We have four more weeks in this Lenten season. Four weeks to bring ourselves into a deeper relationship with Christ.

Perhaps this is the year you’ll call a relative with whom you’ve quarreled, just to strengthen that relationship. Maybe you’ll receive a call from someone with whom you wanted to get in touch with, but were worried they would not welcome hearing from you.

Or maybe, this Lent you’ll intentionally set aside a moment each day to simply give thanks to God for all He has given you.

If you have not begun this work yet, don’t put it off too much longer. It’s a cliché, I know, but life is short. And know that you are not alone, we all struggle a bit this season, because it calls us to closely examine our lives.

What I can assure you is that it is worth the effort.

My prayer for us all is that in doing this work, we come closer to Christ our Lord; for it is only by doing this work will we find peace.