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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Third Sunday in Lent
March 7, 2021

Lectionary Year B: John 2:13-22

It seems strange to think of a crowded space now that we've been prohibited from gathering in closely for a year. The bustling scene into which Jesus bursts in the temple hasn't been replicated in very many places recently, out of interest in preventing the spread of Covid-19. And I'm guessing that many of us will instinctively avoid huddling together too closely long after the virus has disappeared. Trauma associated with the pandemic will haunt us for years to come as we ever so slowly resume more normal patterns of behavior.

Many of you will remember that, a year ago tomorrow, St. Anne's gathered for a final in-person worship service, which began a five-month hiatus from public gathering for us. March 8th, 2020 seems like a long time ago, doesn't it? I don't think any of us were prepared for such a lengthy fast from things we had taken for granted -- ranging from church and school activities to cultural events including concerts and plays. Many assumed that in six to eight weeks we could have the pandemic licked and life could go back to normal. Things that we enjoyed -- like concerts and plays -- were regarded as luxuries and leisure activities that could be easily sacrificed for the greater good.

I seem to recall that such sacrifices weren't regarded as real sacrifices at all. The refrain went something like, "Oh, boo-hoo,

spoiled rich people will have to give up their Saturday nights of fine dining and the theater!" Of course, this neglected to acknowledge the enormous ripple effect of the shutdown; patrons at restaurants and theaters weren't simply being denied their dining and entertainment, but, in addition to that, restaurant servers and theater actors and stagehands and set designers were now out of work. Such things, post-pandemic, will hopefully no longer be regarded as luxuries or even as means of employment, but rather as essential to the morale and cultural enrichment of our society.

Speaking personally, I long for the day when congregational singing can be reintroduced to our services. I have reviewed archived videos of worship, pre-pandemic, and have been reminded of how much music adds to the festive flair of Sunday mornings and Christmas eves. As for the latter, a Christmas with no Christmas carols -- as was the case in 2020 -- was rather odd!

Until the Covid vaccine was released, everyone was (understandably) grouchy, impatient, and fed up. Something that we thought would run its course in six to eight weeks ended up dragging on for a year, and all of us have felt the effects of stress, fatigue, and loss related to the pandemic. To have a light finally appear at the end of the tunnel was a desperately needed break from the Twilight Zone-ish misery we had been enduring.

And we know all too well the bad habits that will have to be broken once this is over -- maybe t-shirts and sweatpants aren't proper business attire, and uncorking a nice Pinot Grigio at eleven

o'clock in the morning isn't a good idea, so we'll find ourselves reintroducing long-lost norms into our lives, if we haven't done so already. After all, the fun can't last forever!

Hopefully, we know, too, that things that shouldn't become normal won't become normal. There's a reason why the Twilight Zone feels like, well, the Twilight Zone. We just know when things are a little "off." But sometimes, people really don't know any better. When Jesus sees that the temple in Jerusalem has become a first-century-A.D. haven of crass commercialism, those gathered there didn't think there was anything wrong with what they were doing, even though things that are often accepted aren't necessarily right.

To understand the context a bit better, we need to remember that this would've been a very busy and important time for the Jewish faithful. The festival of Passover was fast approaching, where Jews remember the angel of death sparing God's people prior to fleeing Egypt. Because of the great solemnity of the festival, the faithful wanted to ensure that their spiritual houses were in order; thus, sacrifices of animals and payment of the temple tax were due. Pilgrims from far away would not have been able to bring their own animals, and no foreign currency could be used to pay the temple tax...so, the "marketplace" atmosphere that Jesus condemns arose out of some rather practical needs. Of course, ritual sacrifices and temple taxes would be rendered obsolete by Jesus, but as Jesus foreshadows his own death and resurrection, his audience at the time would've found his language cryptic, at best.

Jesus says, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19); this, of course, makes no sense to anyone when he says it, and our text clarifies that "he was speaking of the temple of his body" (2:21). Now, this is quite a shift in thinking for those accustomed to the old ways. For centuries, God's people had interacted with their God through the offering of sacrifices to atone for sins and with the mediating work of priests and (often) in and around the Jerusalem temple. We know, however, that the temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D., and that the Gospel of John was written decades later, so the inclusion of this saying of Jesus serves both a historical and prophetic purpose. Yes, there will come a time in which Jesus takes the place of sacrifice, priest, and temple; in fact, the temple is his body, which will be destroyed and rise again in three days, and he will be both priest and sacrifice, interceding on behalf of the faithful and atoning for their sins in his own self-offering. Indeed, Jesus became for us the once-for-all sacrifice who took away our sins by dying on a cross.

We also cannot side-step the extremely fiery prophetic witness that Jesus offers here; with the whip and the driving out of the sheep and the cattle, the Gospel of John includes graphic details that don't appear in the other Gospels. There is, of course, the ransacking of the money changers, too, with overturned tables and coins spilling all over the place. Yes, a hurricane has swept through the Jerusalem temple, and its name is Jesus. Quite the contrast from the gentle Good Shepherd we read of in John, chapter 10!

But we cannot forget that a good portion of Jesus' ministry was prophetic ministry, which, by its nature, is more challenging than reassuring, and disrupting rather than comforting. If, by vividly and dramatically calling out the crass commercialism of the merchants and the money changers, Jesus can awaken those gathered to his new way, then the old way of doing things can end. The facts are plain as day: With Jesus, things will be different. The temple will be destroyed (which literally happened in 70 A.D.), the temple cult of sacrifice and the taxes that supported it will cease, and the new "temple" will be the crucified and resurrected Christ.

As for sacrifice, it is, perhaps, a foreign concept for us to think of animals being offered up on an altar as an atonement for our transgressions. In fact, we think of Jesus himself as the sacrificial Lamb, whose offering put an end to the sacrifices of old. Nowadays, we're more inclined to think of sacrifice as a form of altruism...we give something up for the greater good of our community or society. Thinking back on the past year, we can certainly name once again all the events and activities we've had to do without so as to prevent the spread of Covid. But we know that we won't be able to do it forever. After all, sacrifice is an unsustainable pattern, because people generally don't forget what has been taken away from them; thus, it is understandable that many of us became at one point or another grouchy, impatient, and fed up. Sure, it may seem as if the only things we had to give up were luxuries or leisure activities, but, in reality, these were things that built community, strengthened bonds of friendship, and -- in

the big picture -- made a more livable and civilized society.

Let's hope that our sacrifices end before someone comes along and does what Jesus did to the temple. Thankfully, the vaccine is, as mentioned earlier, providing that much-needed light at the end of the tunnel. I cannot stress enough the need for all of you to get signed up for vaccination as soon as possible, if you have not done so already. And yes, we can reach a threshold of immunity where we can take off our masks and sing again; however, that requires us to be proactive in seeking opportunities for vaccination. Call the Health Department and get on the schedule, and don't wait for them to call you!

Surely, we won't have to make these sacrifices forever. Something -- or someone -- comes along and puts an end to the fruitless ways of old. Jesus showed the world that any sacrifice apart from himself was insufficient to heal the wound of sin that had grown between God and humanity. The system was unsustainable and needed something to take its place once and for all. Likewise, the anticipated immunity of our population thanks to Covid-19 vaccination will (hopefully) put an end to the sacrifices we've had to make. If it seems a little strange to have a priest sacrifice an animal for you in a temple, people in the future might find it almost as strange to have to maintain six feet of distance between each other. Both of them are, in their own way, sacrifices.

But, as we remember during this season of Lent, leading up to Good Friday, Jesus is the once-for-all sacrifice for our sins and who,

in his resurrection, opened the doors to eternal life for us. The future is always good in the grace of God, even when it seems like we have to go through the Twilight Zone to get there.

Amen.