



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMON

“Rediscover Holiness”

Scripture Lessons: *Malachi 3:1-4; John 2:13-22*

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr.
on March 3, 2024, at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church
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Malachi 3:1-4

The Coming Messenger

3 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner’s fire and like washers’ soap; ³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.^[a] ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD, as in the days of old and as in former years.

John 2: 13-22

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, with the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰ The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Rediscover Holiness

When traveling to a foreign country, there often exists the practical need to exchange American dollars for the currency of the country of your destination, if for no other reason than to have some money for snacks or souvenirs along the way. It makes sense to have some shekels in Israel, some pounds in Scotland, or some francs in Switzerland. And usually what happens, in addition to whatever the exchange rate is, is there is also a transaction fee of some kind – the cost of doing business, as it were.

In the opening verses of our New Testament lesson, we find a similar phenomenon taking place. People have come to Jerusalem from near and far to celebrate the Passover / to remember how God had rescued his people from bondage in Egypt.

Now, we have difficulty with tourists on a normal day here in Charleston! Imagine Charleston swelling to say five or six times its population ... that's what it may have felt like to those living in Jerusalem. The streets were full, the inns were full ... and as these people arrived, one thing that was very much on the mind of any dutiful Jew was the importance of making a sacrifice to God!

And to do this they could have brought an animal with them. Or it might have been easier for them to buy an animal when they arrived. Either way, it took some coordinating ... and it often took money, and that's where the money changers came in.

Let's say we didn't bring our own animal and we needed to purchase one (and there was also a temple tax, of course) ... well, that takes money, and more than that ... it takes the right kind of money.

You see, the standard was not as precise as it is for us today, where a quarter equals a quarter. There were some coins that were made with a higher quality metal – maybe a purer silver – and so the temple / the church – was insistent that the right kind and quality of coinage was used.

What I am getting at is that exchange of money was not a bad thing in and of itself. In fact, it was a helpful thing to those Passover pilgrims who had made their way to Jerusalem. And this is an important distinction to make, because, while handling the business of exchanging money needed to happen, it didn't need to be abused and it certainly didn't need to happen in the temple.

And it wasn't always like that! For years the merchants had set up their booths outside the temple and that wasn't particularly far, less than a mile away. Some of you have been there and you know how flat it is. Some scholars say that the Mount of Olives was once the gathering place for those kinds of endeavors.

But at the time of our reading this morning, and perhaps for the sake of convenience, the booths had become located in what was called the Court of the Gentiles, which is an outer part of the temple complex. But not even that outer precinct was to be used for anything other than worship and prayer!

We don't have the equivalent here at First (Scots) of the different kinds of designated areas that existed in the temple, but for the sake of discussion, just imagine what a distraction it would be to our worship service if there was an ATM machine right here next to the pulpit.

Of course, our Stewardship Committee co-chairs, Scott Evans and Bob Hurd, would definitely not want us to neglect the importance of giving to the work of Christ's Church. But neither would they want to

interfere with our worship in Christ's Church.

That's what was happening as Jesus arrived at the temple. The worship. The prayer. The solemnity. The holiness of it all. It was being displaced by a cacophony of sounds. The bleating lambs, the flapping feathers, the coins rattling in the receptacle. Now, Jesus responded to this situation in a very particular way.

To better understand his response, I want to begin by pointing out that copies of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (we call it the NRSV) are in the pew rack in front of you. And the reason we use that version is because it is widely considered to be the most accurate English translation available. Of course, that someone would read from any version of the Bible is a good thing ... don't get me wrong! (PAUSE)

An interesting thing happened a few months ago. I was following along with the Lay Reader and I realized that what I had printed in my black notebook was slightly different from what was being read. Turns out we had inadvertently printed for the Lay Reader from the NRSV version that was put out by the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) a few years ago.

In the defense of the SBL, they were simply being mindful of the fact that since the NRSV came out back in 1989, Biblical manuscripts have continued to be studied ...

Take the Dead Sea Scrolls as an example. They were discovered by Bedouin shepherds in Israel down by the dead sea in the Judean desert back in 1947. Story goes, they were looking for a wandering goat and were throwing stones into a cave when they heard something break. It was a clay canister holding one or more of the scrolls – the scrolls being ancient Biblical manuscripts that dated back to well over 2,000 years ago. In fact, some of the Old Testament experts date them to nearly 300 years before Jesus.

Eventually 1000s of scroll fragments were retrieved from seven area caves. The study of those scrolls went on for years! When I was a student at Princeton Theological Seminary, an eminent scholar, Dr. Charlesworth, was still working on interpreting those fragments and many of the students that he influenced are now members of the Society of Biblical Literature, the organization that produced the NRSV (*updated version).

So, when we read John 2:15 from the NRSV updated version, it reads like this: "Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, with the sheep and the cattle."

Notice that the people are included among the animals that were driven out of the temple; however, when we read John 2:15 from the NRSV it is translated like this: "Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle."

The NRSV leaves out the merchants and focuses on the sheep and the cattle as being driven from the temple.

When Bruce Metzger, one of the editors of the original NRSV and also a professor at Princeton Seminary, was asked about verse number 15 and why their team chose to translate it the way they did, he explained that their committee had been very intentional about making that change, because not only was focusing exclusively on the animals not inconsistent with the Biblical intent, it also kept Jesus from being misinterpreted as a violent person.

That background, along with everything else we know about Jesus – our Savior about whom it was said, “a bruised Reed he will not break” – this is how we come to the conclusion that he did not inflict harm upon the merchants.

The other Biblical accounts of this story / the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) ... assert that the merchants were counted among the animals ... as Jesus cleaned house. My point is simply to make it more clear that an aspect of violence need not be read into this text ... even unto the animals.

I went on a carriage ride a couple weeks ago and the driver of the carriage used a small riding crop – like a little whip – to pop the air next to the horse to make it move. Sometimes, I suspect, the crop might tap the animal on the rump, if it were being especially stubborn. My point is this: the horse is not being hurt, it is not being abused.

It is consistent with the character of Jesus, for us to imagine that he was whipping animals and drawing blood or doing any other ghastly sort of thing. No! Jesus was not about the business of hurting. His was about the business of holiness.

And when the disciples saw this – when they saw Jesus’ cleaning house – they were reminded of something. They remembered a story about a time when King David had been consumed with a similar zeal for the House of God.

The people ask Jesus to explain himself. And he gives them a sign. “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Of course, he was speaking about the temple, his body. But their minds went to the Temple itself.

And why not? After all, the Temple had been central to the life of the Jews from the time Solomon built it (and the Tabernacle before that). Solomon had built the first Temple in about seven years (a good Biblical number that is often associated with completion). Ah, but that Temple had been destroyed in the year 586 BC.

The Temple in this morning's Lectionary reading is a new Temple. It is the Second Temple. And it was completed at the end of the 6th century BC.

And when the crowd that is speaking with Jesus, and is saying that "This Temple has been under construction for 46 years," they are likely talking about the renovations and enlargement of the Temple Mount that had been the work of King Herod.

That temple would also be destroyed. It would happen in the year 70 AD – that central location that served to remind the Jews that God is their God, and they are God's people / that physical Temple that would be lost to them.

There is no doubt that the Jews expect another Temple to be built ... one day. Obviously, that will be an extremely difficult task, considering that the Muslims currently occupy that part of Israel, and on that sacred site they have built their Dome of the Rock, and they have no intention of giving it back!

But here in John's Gospel Jesus isn't talking about another physical Temple! He is himself the Temple – destroyed and yet built back again after three days – just as he said.

At the end of the Bible, and in Revelation 21:22 it reads, "I saw no Temple in the city, for its Temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb."

What's more, the Temple has always been where God dwells among his people, and there is no fuller revelation of God's love than when the Word became flesh and dwelled among us.

The holiness of God was made perfect in Jesus Christ, our Lord. He is the head of the church, which is his body ... that's you and me!

In First Corinthians 6:19-20 the Apostle Paul says this, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body." (PAUSE)

Oh, that we would be a Temple for the Lord / that we would be His people; oh, God's zeal for that divine endeavor never ever ceases; indeed, whether God washes our feet or turns our lives upside down, God remains forever about the business of redeeming us.

As we continue to make our way through the season of Lent, I'll leave you with the following questions:

- What are those things about your life and mine that get in the way of our worship and service to God?
- What is it that Jesus would want to drive out of our life?

- What are those things that occupy our attention at the expense of God?
- I dare say, where are those places where we have more or less set up shop / where we have determined to be about the business of God, and yet have missed the mark / the place / the priority ... where are those tables in your life and in mine that so desperately need to be turned over?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.