**Third Sunday of Lent**

**Saint Dunstan’s Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**

**7 March 2021**

**John 2:12-22**

Signs and symbols are extremely important. A sign shows us the reality of something without that something having to be present at the moment. Think for example about a hospital sign somewhere on Interstate 45. The sign is not the hospital, but it has the power to lead you to the hospital. Think of a family picture. I remember the comfort I would get when I lived in Europe whenever I opened a photo album and saw pictures of my family and friends. The pictures were not my family and friends, but they were powerful images that reminded me of my family and friends. This simple action of remembering give us great comfort, specially at difficult times in our life. Today, in the gospel of John, Jesus gives us a powerful sign that brings comfort into my life every time I think of it. Let us review the passage.

If we were to give a title to the life of Jesus in the Gospel of John, the title would be “Life with the wild man”. There is something very interesting about the Jesus the Gospel of John presents us. The episode that comes immediately before this Passover event narrates the wedding at Cana. Jesus performs a quiet miracle that only his disciples understand. He then leaves the party quietly before anybody really finds out how the 100 gallons of water have become exquisite wine. The Jesus at Cana’s wedding is very similar to the Jesus shown to us by Mark, Matthew, and Luke, where he is constantly telling people to “Tell no one” about his actions or his miracles until the time has come. He even tells his mother in Cana, “My hour (time) has not yet come.” Yet, in the very next episode, which we just read today, Jesus does a very public and dangerous act by disrupting the Temple business on an extremely busy day. This Jesus is a wild Jesus! He goes from a quiet action at Cana to a very visible action at Jerusalem.

John tells us that “The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.” John mentions at least 3 Passover episodes which Jesus attends (perhaps 4 if we are to understand the episode on 5:1 as taking place during Passover. See Whitacre, “John”, 80). This is the main reason why we believe that Jesus’ ministry lasted about 3 years. The first Passover event is the one we read today (2:13-2:22). The second starts in chapter 6 verse 4; and the third at chapter 11 verse 55. Each of the episodes points directly to Jesus' death. Today he “performs a sign that points to his death and reveals his replacement of the temple” (Whitacre, 80-81). In the second episode in chapter 6 he teaches extensively about what his death will mean for God’s people. And then after the episode that begins in chapter 11, he actually dies as the true Passover sacrifice. So, the episode today needs to be seen as forecasting Jesus’ death.

John tells us that, “In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.” This would be normal for the time of Passover. You may recall that the feast of Passover celebrates God’s deliverance of his people from their Egyptian slavery. In the last sign given to Pharaoh, God takes the first born son of every Egyptian family, but he passes over all the Jewish homes, sparing their first born sons (hence the word “Passover). Later on, God parted the waters of the Red Sea, allowing his people to pass as on dry land. Every year from the time of the Exodus on, Jews from every place made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. During this time, sacrifices of rams and lambs were made to God at the Temple as a thanksgiving sacrifice for God’s deliverance of his people. The rams, lambs and doves were sold in the outer court of the Temple, where those who changed civilian money into temple coins and those who sold the grains for the burn offerings also sat. This was the custom and Jesus must have known this to be the traditional way in which Passover took place. Nonetheless, John tells us that Jesus, “Making a whip of cords, drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

This is a very interesting episode in the Gospel of John for several reasons. First, even though all four evangelists give us this episode, the other three Gospels put this episode during Jesus last week of ministry, just before he is arrested and killed. John puts it at the beginning of his ministry. Second, the other three Gospels seem to be criticizing the abuses that the sacrificial system for which the Temple was known. In the other three Gospels, Jesus accuses the vendors of making a house of prayer (a reference to Isaiah) into a den of robbers (a reference to Jeremiah.) But here there is no mention of either expression. So, in John, Jesus is not criticizing the abuses at the temple, but rather, the whole sacrificial system. Third, John presents a much more violent episode than the other three Gospels, as he is the only one that has Jesus “making a whip of cords.” In the other three Gospels, Jesus just overturns the tables, but here he uses a whip. Jesus is angry and he shows it. He is acting like a wild man.

John tells us that the Jews asked for a sign, which Jesus gladly gives them. It is a

mysterious sign they do not understand. In fact, the disciples do not understand it either in the moment and the sign only becomes clear after the resurrection. Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." John tells us that Jesus was talking about the temple of his body, and that “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.”

The differences between this passage in John and the other three Gospels is purposeful. John wants his readers to understand early on that Jesus is the New Temple of God that replaces the old Jerusalem temple. Jesus is the focus of all Christian worship. He is the center of the Christian life and the very reason why we come to church. John also wants us to understand that there is no longer a need for a sacrificial system or the old Passover. Jesus has become the sacrificial lamb. He has given his life for us that through him we all might pass from death into life. He is the new Passover sacrifice. There is no longer a need to kill animals, burn grains, or even make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Christ has become the new sacrifice through which we find our freedom from the slavery of sin. He is the main reason why we come together on Sunday mornings. It is not coincidental that John presents us three episodes of Passover in his Gospel and it is not coincidental that Jesus performs a sign about his death in the first episode, speaks at length about his death in the second episode, and proceeds to die during the third episode. Jesus’ entire ministry is best understood through the language and symbolism of Passover. He is the New Passover sacrifice, he is the New Temple, he is the New Covenant between God and his people.

Life in church can become routine, as we do the same old thing we have always done. We become so accustomed to our little rituals that we lose sight of why we are here. This was in fact happening in Jerusalem. The sacrificial system had become a well-oiled machine, with its own economy, its own traditional customs, and its own set of expectations. Passover was one of the few times every year when extended families saw each other and had an opportunity to catch-up. This was a time of excitement, busy schedules, buying and selling, family gatherings, banquets, and good food. This whole festival atmosphere was such that it was easy to forget the real reason why people were there. To give you a modern example, think about Christmas today. There is so much excitement around gift-giving and receiving, house parties, banquets, and the like, that many forget the reason for the season. Today, Jesus reminds people why they are at the Temple. They are there to thank God for their liberation from slavery.

This passage gives us a very clear mandate today. We must remember. The word

“remember” is given to us twice in this passage. When Jesus is turning tables and whipping people, the disciples remember a phrase of Scripture (Psalm 67). Later on, after Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples remember what Jesus said about raising the temple in three days. It is likewise for us. We come to church to remember what Christ has done for us. We remember this through Holy Scripture and the eating of our own Passover Meal. We come together to give thanks to God for our liberation from the powerful bonds of sin, which we obtain through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. We are not here just for the fellowship, we are not here because this is where we always go on Sunday mornings, we are not here to see and be seen. We are here because we once were lost and now, we are found. We are here because we have a need to remember and to celebrate what Christ has done for us. We need the comfort that signs and symbols give us.

In a few minutes we will eat and drink of the bread and wine of God’s presence among us. We will eat and drink of Christ’s body and blood, freely given for us. And as we eat and drink, we will remember a young man hanging from a cross in Jerusalem. And we will dedicate our lives to honoring and serving that young man, who is none other than God’s own son. We are here because we need to remember. This is our duty, this is our privilege, and this is the reason for our hope. Amen!