

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 4, 2018
Third Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19:7-14
Romans 7:13-25
John 2:13-22

The story in our Gospel lesson today dramatically illustrates how the different Gospel writers use the events of Jesus' life to communicate a specific message for a specific audience or faith community.

All four Gospels tell this story, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke place it near the very *end* of Jesus' ministry. In their accounts, this story plays a pivotal role as the "last straw" that drives Jesus' opponents to conclude that the only way to deal with this upstart rabbi who is threatening the primacy of the Temple and their precarious relationship with Rome is to do away with him.

John also links this story to Jesus' death, but he places the story at the very *beginning* of Jesus' ministry, here in chapter two. It comes right after the relatively small scale and more private sign of turning water into wine at the wedding of Cana.

What is John trying to say by placing this story here at the *beginning* of things rather than at the *end* of things?

The context may help us a bit here. A very important event happens here in John chapter 2 -- do you remember what it is? It is the story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee, where Jesus turns the water into wine.

Do you remember how the story plays out? There were six large stone jars filled with water, and when the wine ran out Jesus instructed the steward to fill the stone jars with water and to taste it. When he did so, he discovered it had become wine!

But the small detail we must not miss is that those stone jars were used for the rites of *purification*.

By the time of Jesus, an elaborate system of purification had developed where some things were considered pure and others impure. This “purity system” served to draw sharp social boundaries between people. Clear lines of demarcation were drawn between Jew and Gentile, male and female, rich and poor, pure and impure, righteous and sinners.

And guess what became the heart and soul of this “purity system?” The Temple. The house of God. The sacred place of prayer and worship.

As an example, Jewish people were required to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem and to offer sacrifices in the temple. And if you have to travel large distances, it would be impractical and cost prohibitive to bring animals with you. So there were businessmen who would sell you your sacrificial animals once you

arrived. These animals had to be perfect, however, which meant that they were also expensive. Many poor people could not afford them.

Further, it would be idolatrous to purchase these animals with Roman coins, because the emperor's image was stamped on them. So there were money changers who offered to "exchange" your currency for Jewish currency -- for a price, of course. And so the social boundaries continued to be sharply drawn through this purity system, and the locus of much of this activity was the Temple.

So now, back to our question. Why does John place this story at the beginning of his Gospel? John puts this story where he does because it reveals something very important about *who* Jesus is: he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). He is the embodiment of "grace upon grace" (John 1:16).

And, perhaps most importantly, *Jesus is the new (and true) Temple*. Remember what he says here? "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up!" John then adds that Jesus was referring to his *body*.

I believe that John places this story where he does in order to show that with Jesus now on the scene, there is no need for changing money, for purchasing animals, for making sacrifice – ever again. (This is also why the large stone jars of water used for purification are turned to wine – they are no longer needed because Jesus is the new route to purity!)

We must remember that when John writes his Gospel, the Temple had long since been destroyed. I think John places this story where he does in order to show the people to whom he writes that they don't need the Temple at all. Why? Because Jesus' body – his physical incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and then the gift of the Holy Spirit – is sufficient to mediate God's grace and mercy. Jesus is the new Temple who now becomes the dwelling place of God. Jesus is the one who makes the unapproachable God approachable.

John confirms this when he writes the Revelation while exiled on the island of Patmos. Near the end of his vision, he describes the New Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven. In the midst of his description, he says: "And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb" (Rev. 21:22).

The Temple was a magnificent structure, imposing and awe-inspiring. But it was a type, a foreshadowing of something greater to come. More specifically, it foreshadowed *Someone* who was greater that would come.

And you and I are here today in order to offer sacrifice and to worship. But our sacrifice is the offering up of our *lives* to Jesus. When the offerings and gifts are brought forward each week here and placed on this altar, it is not merely those physical gifts that we offer up. Those gifts represent the totality of our lives. They symbolize *all that we are and all that we have and all that we ever hope to be*.

We even say as much in our prayer of living sacrifice. Do you remember?

And here we offer and present unto You, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto You...

In this Lenten season, we have the opportunity to reflect deeply about what those words mean. We learn from the Holy Spirit about specific and tangible ways we are called and empowered to *live* these words.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, come with faith and thanksgiving. But come also with a spirit of obedience. An old hymn asks: *Is your all on the altar of sacrifice laid?*

As you come, come as though you are placing your whole life on this altar where the gifts were placed earlier. For in truth, that's exactly what you are doing. And the bread and the wine testify to you that Christ accepts your sacrifice, and helps you to make it a *living* one.

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

