

# Sermon: Lent 3

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March 4, 2018

Year B  
Exodus 20:1-17  
Psalm 19  
1 Corinthians 1:18-25  
John 2:13-22

Words matter... what we say... matters... sometimes we try to be witty or funny... and it fails utterly... and we hope no one really heard... sometimes we speak loving words... words that soothe... words that are like a restorative healing balm... sometimes we speak without thinking... and then our ears can't believe what our mouths said... sometimes our emotions get the best of us... and we may say something sarcastic... or facetious... sometimes we speak in anger... sometimes the words we say are like curses... that damage hearts and break relationships... words like *I hate you*... when what we really meant was... *I hate what you did*...

And sometimes it's difficult for others to understand the words we say... what our message is... sometimes we bring all of our emotional baggage to what we hear... project our own meaning... our own interpretation onto those words... even when the speaker meant nothing of the sort... and there's no communication...

And liturgical language is important... as I continue to learn... a few weeks ago... in the context of the Eucharist... we changed... *Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord*... to *Blessed is the One who comes in the Name of the Lord*... countless people... men and women... can certainly come in the name of the Lord... but in the context of Eucharist... we refer only to Jesus...

And I am confident that God is with each and every one of us... all the time... under any and all circumstances... and you will almost certainly never hear me pray... *Holy God... please be with the Smith family*... because I am confident that God is... so I'd be much more inclined to pray... *Holy God... please help the Smith family feel your healing presence*... there's a difference... because some people feel abandoned by God... so in

my eagerness to affirm God's presence... today's bulletin says *God is with you*... as a statement of fact... but after talking with another priest on Wednesday... I'm willing to consider that there may be a certain degree of presumption in that... because when we say *The Lord be with you*... or *God be with you*... it's more of an invocation... an incantation... a summoning of God in prayer... and so there is a dance between certainty and confidence... and hope is in the middle... these are fine theological points... but in my opinion... they are points worth exploring...

Scholars who explore the origins of The Ten Commandments... believe they are based on an ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaty form... the suzerain was the overlord... and the vassals were the servants... the treaty defined who the overlord was... recounted what he had done for the people... and outlined what was expected of them... and the Decalogue was almost certainly... the first time that the suzerain was understood to be God... and the vassals... God's people... they are more contract than covenant... more about transaction... than about transformation...

But as professor Wil Gafney writes... The commandments pertain to all of Israel... and on occasion... to their slaves... animals... and immigrants among them... but they are addressed to individual male subjects... the commandments are addressed to adults who can be bound by them... for example... honoring parents is about caring for elders... not teaching children to obey...

Just before today's Gospel passage... in John 2:1-12... Jesus and his mother had just been to a happy event... the wedding in Cana... honoring his mother may be part of why he acquiesced to her desire... and performed his first miracle... and turned water into wine... this wedding imagery represents God's relationship with Israel... and Marcus Borg wrote... *this... John is saying... is what the story of Jesus is about... the marriage between heaven and earth... and more... it is about a wedding at which the wine never runs out... and the best is saved for last...*

Today though... and let's remember that this Gospel was written in about 90 AD... ten to twenty years after the destruction of the Temple... today though... we see a different Jesus... who's had enough of the transactions that took place in the Temple... we tend to think of him as being angry... but he is filled with zeal for God's house... and he responds... not just to the selling of cattle... sheep... and doves for sacrifice... but to the transactions which exchanged foreign coins into the currency allowed in the Temple...

You see... the regulations concerning tithes... had been established in Deuteronomy 14:24... and to summarize... the text said... when God has blessed you... and the distance you need to travel to make your offering is too great... turn your offering into money... and go to the place that God has chosen... and spend the money for whatever you wish... oxen... sheep... wine... and you shall eat there in the presence of God... you and your household rejoicing together... and what may have been many places... became one place... Jerusalem...

The words of scripture matter... and there is meaning in the readings appointed for today... but when we look at more of the whole... the individual trees fade into the background... the forest comes into view... and there is even deeper meaning... because as early as 2 Chronicles... written after the Babylonian Exile... and written in Jerusalem... probably in the 4th century BCE... there is a record of God's promise to remain in the Temple forever... in 7:12... God says to Solomon... *I have heard your prayer, and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice... if my people turn from their wicked ways.. then I will hear... and will forgive their sin... my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place... for I have consecrated this house so that my name may be there forever...*

This understanding was consistent with the idea of city gods... geographically bound to particular cities... not omnipotent but powerful there only... yet in the Book of Ezekiel... we have the story of God leaving the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem... and going to

Babylon to be with God's people in Exile... omnipresence... in Babylon and in Jerusalem... both at the same time...

It seems as though the Cleansing of the Temple... is only a part of the story... that Jesus was motivated by more than just that... because in John 4... Jesus talks with the Syrophenician woman at the well... and says... *believe me... the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain... nor in Jerusalem... the hour is coming... when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth... God is spirit... and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth...*

The earliest writers of ancient Near Eastern scriptures... understood their gods as city-gods... because of their own tribalism... the earliest writers understood god as a jealous and vengeful god... because of their own projected jealousies and vengeance... but over the course of history... and thanks to the work of biblical scholars and theologians... many people of faith today... understand that God is love... who believe that religion ought to be more about transformation in the here and now... and less about salvation in the hereafter... we have expanded God's sphere of influence from a tribe... to a building... to a city... to a circumference which knows no bounds... and Jesus shifts the focus of prayer and sacrifice... from the Temple... to the human heart... on which God is eager to write God's laws... which are life giving... and not life taking... as happened this week at Central Michigan University... God's truths are irrepressible... in the long run... they cannot be squelched... they are like the grass that breaks through a concrete sidewalk... God's truths cannot be killed... try to destroy them... and they will rise again...

Hosea foreshadowed this truth in 6:1-2... *Come... let us turn back to the Lord... He can heal us... He can bind us up... in two days He will make us whole again... on the third day He will raise us up... and we shall be made whole by His favor...*

The money changers in the Temple... made it easier for people to offer animal sacrifices... we don't offer animal sacrifices anymore... but do we offer sacrifices of truth... do we offer sacrifices of penitence... how easy is it for us to acknowledge when we are wrong... not just individually... but corporately too... which is God's primary concern...

Are we human enough... to acknowledge our good deeds as small pebbles... and our sins as high as mountains... and with what kinds of tribal... or cultural... or partisan money changers do we engage... who fool us into selling God's values... for the values of the world... and what will it finally take... for us to drive them out... as Jesus did...

Mike+