

Shepherd of the Mountains

Lutheran Church (LC-MS)

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The Third Sunday in Lent

March 4, 2018

“Bringing Down the House”

Text: Malachi 3:1-4

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, 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 fullers' soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. 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.”

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:2).

What a difference a day makes.

So just imagine what a difference a few days can make.

The truth is, you don't have to imagine; it's right there in our Gospel lesson this morning. The difference of “a few days” (John 2:12). The difference between a few days ago and today. The difference between up and down. The difference between Cana and Capernaum. The difference between “My

hour has not yet come” (2:4) and, well, something more like that song we sometimes sing in Sunday School, “This is the day!”

Jesus has been up and down, all right. Or is it, down and up? In *elevation*, it's the former for sure. It's in the verse right before our gospel lesson this morning begins:

“After this he went down [emphasis added] to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days” (Jn. 2:12).

It's only one verse, but it's a mouthful! And that's probably the reason why our friends down at Lectionary Central - those good folks who lay out our lessons for us each week like they were Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes - elected to leave it out. Out of our Gospel lesson this morning.

I'm adding it back.

“After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days” (Jn. 2:12).

After what, of course.

After, as John earlier summarized, “this, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory” (2:11).

Do you remember? The wedding? The wedding at Cana?

It was a family affair. Jesus was there with his mother. Jesus was there with his family. Jesus was there with his disciples.

Mother Mary sensed something was wrong. She saw they had run out of wine. She alerted Jesus to the problem.

He snapped at her. Well, Jesus, always the perfect son, couldn't have *snapped*, of course, but tell me if it doesn't always somehow *seem* like that to us:

“Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come” (4).

We bristle at the “*woman*” part. We probably do the same when he addresses her the same way from the cross - “*Woman, behold your son*” (19:26). And do you know what? In *John’s* Gospel, that’s the very next time we hear from Mother Mary.

That *can’t* all be a *coincidence*. John has to be *telling* us something. And at the risk of seeming like I might be trying to get blood out of a stone, at the risk of seeing the blood of Christ under every single wine-rock, that is, we might want to try to figure out what that is. For if we don’t, we’re going to find Mary’s reaction to Jesus here a bit confusing. If we understand it the way we’ve always understood it, that is. For then Jesus seems to say, “Not *now*, Mom! It’s not yet time for me to *do* anything,” and what Mom immediately then says - “*to the servants*” - is, “*Do whatever he tells you.*”

Now either she didn’t *believe* him - and *that* sure doesn’t seem possible - or *she* understood something different in His words than *we* did. And perhaps it was this: maybe Mary understood that Jesus wasn’t talking about the time to kick off his public ministry, but rather the time for his suffering and death. Yes, let Mary be Israel here, and let her request for wine to be an implicit call for the shedding of his blood. Let Jesus’ address to his mother - the impersonal and even off-putting “*woman*” - be a sign that in the *new* Israel, blood relationships aren’t going to mean anything, but rather only by faith in Jesus shed *blood* are family members going to be born. And let Jesus’ answer to his mother thus be, “The hour for my *pascha* - my *passion*, my *Passover*, my *crucifixion* - has not yet come.” And with that all the case, then Jesus would be free to perform the first of the signs He did in order to manifest his glory - right there in the hill country of *Galilee*, of all places - “*at Cana in Galilee.*”

“*After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days*” (Jn. 2:12).

And don’t even get me *started* on the “*brothers*” part; I *told* you this single verse was a *mouthful*! Don’t get me started, because *John* never gets started. John doesn’t try to explain whether these were Jesus’ half-brothers (Joseph’s sons by a previous marriage), or cousins (as the Greek word is often used in Scripture), or his as-close-to-natural-as-possible - given his wholly *unnatural* conception - siblings through Mary and his step-father Joseph. Again, as I say, John’s only focus seems to be not on those who are related to Jesus naturally, but rather supernaturally - by grace, through faith, at the Holy Spirit’s leading. And so, he moves right along, the way that’s more typical of St. Mark, Mr. Gospel-in-a-hurry.

12 After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.

And what a difference a few days makes. Jesus and his “family” went back down again, to the little harbor town that he made his home throughout his Galilean ministry. But then . . . but then . . . well, let’s get out of the way before John runs us over!

13 The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

“*The Passover of the Jews was at hand.*”

Do you hear it? Time to go, right? Can’t wait a minute longer.

“*The Passover of the Jews. . . .*”

Now while we could simply understand those words to be another way of saying the *Jewish* Passover, but since, frankly, that’s a little too obvious - since no one else but the Jews, of course, *has* a Passover, I mean - I’m thinking we might want to look for more in them. We might want to hear echoes or hints of *another* Passover, a *second* Passover. We might, that is, want to hear John here emphasizing that this *first*, if you will, *πασχα* - this first Passover or passion - is of

the Jews, but that there's going to be *another* one, one of Jesus, if you will - the one we know of in His death and resurrection. And while the Passover "*of the Jews*" very soon is going to mean *nothing*, the one *of Jesus*," if you will, is going to make all the difference.

"The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem."

Went up, not to celebrate the former, but to initiate - to kick off - the latter. And sure enough,

14 In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there.

"Found." The word says Jesus didn't encounter what you'd *expect*, but rather what you *wouldn't* expect. He didn't encounter what would be *in* place "*in the temple*," but rather what would be *out* of place.

"He found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons." "[He found . . .] money-changers sitting there."

Now while all four gospel writers tell this story, John is the only one who mentions the oxen and sheep. He's also the only one to place the story here. In John, this is Jesus first *public* act. In John, this is Jesus' first visit to Jerusalem. In John, this is Jesus' first Passover. In John, this is Jesus' first confrontation with the Jews.

As I say, John doesn't waste any time. And maybe that's because for John it's the message not the time line that's most important, that he wants to be sure his readers hear. And that message is that - remember how John had John the Baptizer pointing Jesus out to the crowds? - "*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*" (1:29) - never mind that those oxen and sheep might be *bigger* - was running off all the competition!

For isn't that exactly what happened next?

15 And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen.

"Making a whip."

Making out of *what*? The Greek word (σχοινιον) - "rush" or "reed" - says maybe out of the bedding used for the animals. More likely, out of the ropes used to tie those same animals.

Making a "*whip*" - a scourge - (fra-JELL-ee-on) φραγγελιον, right from the Latin *fragellum*

"He drove them all" - man and beast! - out of the temple." Money-changers, too!

This is the only place that noun appears in Scripture. Those who made "big money" into small, we might say - like we would ask if someone could give us "change" for a big bill or for a dollar. They were just "*sitting*" there - like they *belonged*, like they *owned* the place!

Pouring out their coins and overturning their tables, Jesus made that clear: they had no business there any longer. Literally, they had no "business" there any longer.

"Take these things away," "He told those who sold the pigeons." And then I like to think He told everyone who was watching, "Do not make my Father's house a house of trade."

Oh, and it wasn't their business *practices*, as you often hear; it was their business, *period*! He was shutting them down. He was shutting *it* down. That whole "*business*" had to go. That whole system of buying and offering sacrifices for sin. Yes, as of that very moment, as I say, the "Lamb" was running off the competition! All the others were out of business. That "one perfect final offering, the Lamb" (words and music, Gerald Coleman, "*The Lamb*") was taking their place.

He was bringing down the house - the whole house of cards. Goodbye, temple *building*, there's a *new* Temple in town. There's a *new* place where God will henceforth meet His people. There's a new place where His people henceforth will worship Him.

“*A house of trade*”? No, there would be no more “*trading*” after - on Calvary’s cross - after His *πάσχα*, His Passover, His passion - Jesus would trade His perfect life for the life of every sinner in the world.

The Jews - who we can only assume had to be watching everything, seeing how they were both the Trustees and the Elders in the place, finally spoke up.

“Hey, hey, hey! *We’re* in charge here. Just what do you think you’re doing? What gives you the right to . . .? Show us your ID. *What sign do you show us for doing these things?*”

Only, in demanding that Jesus show them some sign to prove that He had authority to upset the entire Jewish apple cart like He just had, those leaders only showed that they had missed the *real* sign, the *first* sign - the sign of Jesus’ identity as “*the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world,*” the promised Messiah, Israel’s Savior and Deliverer.

19 *Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”*

But that only confused them all the more!

“*Temple? What temple? Raise? You mean rebuild?*”
You? Little old you? You all by your lonesome? Just who do you think you are?”

20 *The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you [emphasis added] raise it up in three days?”*

John to the rescue - at least for all of us who are his readers:

21 *But he was speaking about the temple of his body.*

He was talking about his Passover. He was talking about His death and resurrection for the life of the world.

Not that His disciples understood at the time! No, not until He was raised again from the dead - what a difference a few days makes - did they think back and put it all together:

22 *When therefore 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 word that, again, I don’t think his disciples remembered until after He had been raised from the dead, and they could think back and put it all together. The word Jesus had spoken about

how He would be Isaiah’s Suffering Servant - emphasis on *suffering*. The word, in a word, He had spoken when he spoke the word of the Psalmist, the word of Psalm 69:9:

“*Zeal for your house will consume me.*”

But again, maybe not in the way you might at first *think*, the way you’ve always *thought*. Not that His zeal would do Him in, in that He would self-destruct, *implode*, as it were. No, rather that His zeal would be the reason *others* would do him in -in the *explosion*, if you will, that would be His *consumption*, to use His word, the taunting and mocking and scourging of His agonizing crucifixion.

But while that “*zeal*” would *consume Him*, it would *save us*. “*By His stripes, we are healed.*” “*Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace*” (Is. 53:5).

It was all part of His plan - His plan from the very beginning. The plan Malachi wrote about. The one that included John the Baptist preparing His way. The one that had Him coming to his temple. The one that had Him bringing down the house of cards that we could in any way make ourselves righteous before our holy God. The one that had our fiery Savior burning off every remnant of our own presumed righteousness, and instead clothing us in His own perfect righteousness. From the prophet, then:

“*Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, 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 fullers’ soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. 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.*”

For all of that, down to the minutest detail, thanks be to God. The God who comes. The God who saves. The God who calls us to live a righteous life, that seeing our good works others may glorify Him.

Indeed, thanks be to God. Amen.