

Sermon: “Not Again...”

3/7/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This past Tuesday was “Dress Silly Day” at Thane’s preschool. In preparation, Mallory and I asked Thane, our oldest son, what he would like to wear. He said he didn’t know, so we pulled out his costumes and many of his clothes. No matter what we suggested, he said no. No...no...no...we heard over and over and over again. Finally, he decided right before bedtime that he wanted to wear his Batman costume. We were relieved, at least until the next morning, when we learned that he chose the Batman costume so that he could take his batarangs with him; you know, the little bat-shaped throwing stars that Batman uses. Well, upon being told that they would have to stay home, Thane decided he no longer wanted to wear the costume. “Thane,” we finally said, frustrated after hearing no several more times, “we’re tired of making suggestions, we’re tired of trying to help. If you don’t choose something soon, and I mean soon, you’ll be going to school in the clothes you have on.” He promptly decided that he wanted his sweater turned inside-out and a pair of shorts put on over his sweatpants. He was dressed silly just in time for “Dress Silly Day.”

When Jesus entered the Temple in today’s Gospel lesson, he became frustrated, much like Mallory and I a few days ago. According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, his frustration lay in the fact that the money changers and people selling animals had transformed his Father’s house into a “den of robbers.” Each year, the city of Jerusalem more than tripled in size during Passover, making it necessary that money changers and sacrificial animals be made available. After all, not everyone who traveled there used the same currency or could take a sacrificial lamb along with them on the journey. But just because these trades were necessary did not mean that

they were being done in good faith. Those exchanging their money, we hear Matthew, Mark, and Luke declare, were receiving far less than they deserved and the animals they were buying were being marked up far more than they should have been. What frustrated Jesus that day, the other Gospel writers tell us, in other words, was that Jews were taking advantage of their fellow Jews. And what's worse, they were doing so in the Temple. So out of frustration he turned over their tables and drove them out.

In the Gospel of John, we hear a different twist on the story. Remember, what frustrated Mallory and I a few days ago was not that Thane said no to the first few silly outfits. It was that he said no over and over and over again. We heard no so many times that by the next morning we could no longer hold in our frustration. "Not again," we hear Jesus sigh as he entered the Temple that day. "Why did you have to make my Father's house into a marketplace? Why did you have to defile it yet again?" As Jesus stood there, the prophets Hosea, Micah, Amos, and Isaiah almost certainly entered his mind. Each of these prophets had been sent by God, sent to tell the Israelites to stop engaging in things like showy worship, meaningless sacrifice, and false piety. And when they didn't, God sent Ezekiel a vision in which God declared that the Temple had become so defiled that God's presence was leaving. Jesus was frustrated not just because of what he witnessed that day, but because what he witnessed was part of larger pattern.

Due to their unfaithfulness, God's presence had left the Temple, the Temple itself had been destroyed by the Assyrians, and the Ark of the Covenant, the chest which housed the Ten Commandments, the rules that governed how the Israelites were supposed to live, the rules we heard God give to the Israelites in today's Old Testament lesson, had been taken who-knows-where. The Temple was meant to be a holy place where the Israelites could seek forgiveness for their sins and reconciliation with God and one another. Now, it was a marketplace. A place filled

with clinking coins and noisy animals, not to mention animated discussions over unfair exchange rates and overpriced sheep and cattle. “Something needs to be done,” Jesus said to himself, “if my Father’s house is going to once more be a place where people truly encounter God.” So he made a whip from rushes and reeds and drove the sheep and cattle out, before emptying the money changer’s purses and overturning their tables.

One day, hopefully soon, we will be gathered together once more in our church building for worship. And on that day, we will need to ask ourselves an important question: what would Jesus say if he were standing here today? Would he lift up our church as a holy place in which people truly encounter God, or would he sigh and say to himself, “not again”? Don’t get me wrong. I truly believe that this is a place where God is present and in which we are seeking to faithfully praise God. But the same belief was true of the Israelites gathered that day at the Temple. The reason why they asked Jesus for a sign was not because they lacked faith or that they wanted to prove Jesus wrong. It was because that was God had taught them to distinguish between true and false prophets. They wanted to know if what Jesus was saying and doing was truly from God, for him to prove it with a sign, and Jesus took their request seriously. The problem is they weren’t yet ready to understand the sign.

Hindsight is 20/20. What if I had come to you one year ago and told you that God has given me a message, and here is how you will know that it is true? Before we worship in this church building again, a pandemic will cause more than 28.8 million Americans to get sick and 517,000 to die, while wreaking untold havoc on our communities, nation, and world. How many of you would have believed me, would have believed that sign, and how many of you would have thought that I must be mistaken, to put it nicely? One year ago, I never could have imagined how much our lives have changed, how much struggle and heartbreak we and all those around us

have experienced. Now, the rise of the pandemic seems so obvious, just like how it seems so obvious that Jesus meant that his body would be raised in three days rather than the Temple. But it was not so obvious at the time.

Times change, and with it so must we and our worship. And change is not necessarily a bad thing. It gives us an opportunity to grow and to see things anew; to see things in ways we never could have before. When we gather together for in-person worship once more, we most likely won't yet be able to sing hymns or anthems. One of the reasons why I am and always will be United Methodist is the music. I love that we don't just talk about what we believe, but we sing it, like when we sing the great Charles Wesley hymn: "Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart." This hymn is a clear and powerful testament to who we believe Christ is and what we believe Christ was sent to do. There was a time when people complained because worship was only supposed to be done in Latin, because laypeople were receiving Communion rather than just the priest, and because black Methodists were worshiping on the main floor of the church rather than in the balcony, and when the main floor was filled, in the front of the balcony rather than in the back.

When we gather together once more, we have an option. We can choose to lament the things we have lost. We can complain about how we don't like worship without singing, how we wish we didn't have to sit so far apart, and how we miss greeting one another in Christ with hugs and handshakes. We can say no over and over and over again. Or, we can look at all the things that have changed and try and learn from them. Learn what makes this church and time of

worship so special, learn what things we've been doing because simply out of habit, and maybe even decide to make some changes.

Lent is a time of introspection, of looking within ourselves and taking note of all the ways in which we've strayed from God. In the days and weeks ahead, may we each be willing to take that hard look. May we each be willing to acknowledge that we as individuals and as a church are not perfect, that there are tables in our lives that need to be overturned, and some which already have been. May we each seek to be holy people worshiping God in a holy place, so that when we find Jesus in our midst, he won't be sighing and saying to himself, "Not again." No, he'll be embracing us as faithful children of God, over and over and over again. Amen.