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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

March 7, 2021

3 Lent, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[Exodus 20:1-17](#)

[1 Corinthians 1:18-25](#)

[John 2:13-22](#)

[Psalm 19](#)

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So there are two things that are true.

We owe God everything. And there is nothing we can do for God.

We owe God absolutely everything. Every atom of our bodies, every moment of our lives, life, love, everything was made by God, is held in existence by God for every instant of time.

And there is nothing we can possibly do for God. God doesn't need our gifts or offerings. We can't do God a favor, or put God in our debt, or even pay God back what we owe. We can keep God's commandments, for sure. The central ones, the ten Commandments we heard today, or as they're called in Godly Play, the Ten Best Ways to Live. They're a way of honoring God. But whether we break them constantly or somehow keep them perfectly every day of our lives, they don't change the fact that we still owe God absolutely everything; and there is nothing we can possibly do for God.

Now people still feel a deep instinct to do something for God, whether it's to get God to do something good back for us, or just to express love and devotion, or most likely some combination of those motives. So we make offerings and sacrifices.

Now in some societies the very biggest kind of sacrifice, the one that mattered most, has been to offer a person. Human sacrifice has a kind of sinister but compelling logic. We owe God absolutely everything, our entire selves—so maybe if we offer God, or the Gods, an entire self, it will truly make an impression.

Way back in the book of Genesis is a story that preserves the ancient memory of this kind of logic, when God's chosen friend Abraham came to believe God wanted him to sacrifice his son Isaac. As they were on their way, Isaac asked where the animal was, and Abraham said, in words full of irony, "God himself will provide the lamb for the offering, my son." And then just as Abraham was about to do the terrible deed, God intervened and told him to stop—and provided a sheep instead. And in that story we have, somehow, the ancient wisdom of God's people of Israel, the realization that taking human life is not the sacrifice God desires. And many centuries later the Temple of Israel was built on that same legendary spot where a sheep was offered in place of Isaac. And cows, and sheep, and birds were offered day by day, together with grain and oil and wine, a fragrant offering to the LORD.

And into that Temple, many more centuries later, walks Jesus, with a whip made out of cords.

We probably shouldn't read this passage as Jesus resorting to physical violence. It doesn't say he uses the whip on people. It very clearly says he uses it to drive out the sheep and cattle. We're talking about a kind of flail, a herding tool. What we should see is a carefully planned action, not a spur-of-the-moment decision. Jesus has planned this. He's taken the time to prepare the right equipment, like a protester making a poster and packing a water bottle and phone charger.

We should also see a very methodical approach in what Jesus does. There are three kinds of animals for sacrifice: cattle or sheep, or doves as an alternative for the poor. And there were moneychangers, to facilitate buying your animal with the appropriate kind of coinage. This made a lot of sense, because it wasn't practical to bring livestock with you all the way to Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice, nor were your animals guaranteed to meet the standards; so you would purchase an appropriate animal there. We shouldn't assume this setup was exploitative or corrupt or that there was something deeply wrong with the system. It was set up to make a complex process in a huge place work. But Jesus is very methodical in how he disrupts it. First he drives out cattle and sheep—not doves, because you can't drive out stacks of caged doves with a whip. Then he goes back in and turns over the money tables. And finally he orders the dove sellers out too. He has a plan for each category. This is a well-thought-out demonstration.

And it is a demonstration. It's easy to imagine this scene as Jesus leaving the Temple in complete disarray, walking out leaving a scene of chaos behind him with the entire operation shut down. But the Temple complex was huge: big enough to fit twelve soccer fields inside.<sup>1</sup> What Jesus does in this story would have

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<sup>1</sup> According to E.P. Sanders, as cited by Paula Frederiksen: "Gospel Chronologies, the Scene in the Temple, and the Crucifixion of Jesus," <http://www.bu.edu/religion/files/pdf/Gospel-Chronologies.pdf>.

been clearly seen by his followers and the people right nearby, but most of the worshipers and sellers in the Temple that day might have missed it completely. Imagine a scene like this happening at a big football stadium today, or a big fairgrounds. Section 117B might be completely disrupted for half an hour or so while life in the rest of the complex goes on more or less as usual. Which may be why all four gospels so clearly preserve the memory of this event while other Jewish and Roman historical sources don't mention it. Jesus wasn't trying to actually shut down the entire Temple. He didn't have to. He was making a symbolic action, in the tradition of centuries of the prophets before him, who went out and did public actions to demonstrate symbolically what God was doing.

And what God is doing in Jesus is something new. Throughout the millennia we have been trying to give something to God, sometimes through violence, sometimes in gentler ways, but always trying to honor our obligation to God, because we owe God absolutely everything, and always trying to do something for God, even though there is nothing God needs from us. But now in Jesus God is giving a gift to us, and turning all our sacrifices and offerings upside down. That's the foolishness of the cross Paul writes about in our epistle today: God's foolishness wiser than human wisdom, God taking our systems and expectations and turning them upside down.

“God himself will provide the lamb for the offering,” said Abraham to his son on this spot, so long ago. And now God has indeed provided one who just a little earlier in this gospel story John the Baptist has named as the Lamb of God. This Lamb who drives out the sheep and cattle and doves because he himself is the offering of offerings. Not, as Christians sometimes understand it, a kind of return to the logic of human sacrifice, where Jesus dies a bloody and painful death to

placate a vicious and wrathful God. That's human wisdom, not God's. It's not God who demands violence: it's us. And the offering Jesus brings is not his death so much as his life: his whole life of love and healing and teaching, a life that is faithful and brave. And yes, that life does lead him into the teeth of our human urge to violence, so his death too does become a part of that offering, and we can truly say that we are redeemed by his death—but a death that comes to absorb and end our violence, not to glorify it.

Behold the Lamb of God. We owe God absolutely everything. There is nothing we can do for God. Nor do we need to. Jesus has come among us as God's gift to us, drawing us into a new way of living: a way that will indeed demand absolutely everything from us as we are shaped into that self-giving life of Christ; but a way that is also life and peace and joy unending.