

Of the texts for this Sunday of Lent, I have chosen to take a look at two of them. The one that I read from John's Gospel and the familiar one on the Ten Commandments which Suzanne read.

My preference for today would really be the Ten Commandments. After all, newscaster Ted Koppel delivered perhaps the most popular address ever given at a University Commencement a few years ago, based on the Ten Commandments. And if it worked for Ted Koppel, why wouldn't it work for me?

Ted said, in a nutshell, if you look at all the problems we have in the modern world, most of them are attributable to our failure to follow the Ten Commandments. Then he went right down the list. See? If all of us would follow those Commandments, things would go better for us. The graduates and the parents loved it.

I would love to preach that to you. Keep the Sabbath Holy, after all I am here, right? Don't take the name of God in vain—I don't. Don't steal—I don't even think about it. Don't kill—I wouldn't. I could go on.

I could preach that. And as Ted Koppel demonstrated, most of you would like it. I could probably have done pretty well with a sermon on the Ten Commandments this morning, but there is this gospel text for today that I find more difficult to preach because it talks about my turf.

You heard it a few moments ago. One Sunday in Lent, we got all dressed up and came to church, and just as we got ready to begin to worship the preacher perched in the pulpit, there was a bang at the door. A fierce intruder caused such a commotion back there that everyone fell into stunned silence. The greeter tried to restrain him but could not. And, if you listened closely to the reading of the Gospel lesson for this morning you know how it went.

Jesus and his disciples were making one of the required trips to the temple for the celebration of Passover. The Passover, you will remember, was a festival that was begun to help the Jewish people to remember the night when death was spread throughout Egypt when Israel was in slavery in that land. It was one of the powerful signs that God did to help the Pharaoh to finally decide that the Israelites could leave. The angel of death passed over the homes of Jews. So, an annual festival of remembrance was held to help the people remember what God had done in their behalf.

But, when Jesus made his way to the entrance of our worship place he noticed it had been made into a market place. People were selling animals and changing coins. So, Jesus made a whip and drove the animals out of the temple and turned over the tables of the money changers and yelled to the top of his voice: *"Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"*

I doubt that any of us can remember seeing Jesus this mad. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell the same story. But they all discreetly place this Cleansing of the Temple toward the end of their gospels. And there, at the end, during the last week of his life, you can understand the rage of Jesus, what with his critics picking and poking at him for months, trying to entrap him. His rage is excusable; the final tortured lashing out of one whose patience has finally been overcome by their cruelty. But here, less than two chapters into John's Gospel, there is no way to explain away Jesus' rage. At this point, no one has said a word against Jesus. He has just called his first disciples and everyone has been quite

impressed with Him, marveling when he turned water into wine. So, you cannot explain his anger by saying that they have pushed Jesus to the limit, or he is at last at his wit's end with their opposition. This outburst in the temple, in John's Gospel, was early, at the beginning right at the first right after the wedding and the turning of the water into wine.

We see Jesus standing there, white hot fury, whip in hand, kicking over their tables, squawking birds let loose, slinging their coins.

"Get this stuff out of here," he screams. *"You shall not make my Father's house a house of trade."*

But you see the problem is not only that Jesus is mad, but he is in the temple mad, he is at Passover mad. This scene occurs in the temple, during Passover, the great celebration of the liberation of Israel from Egyptian slavery, the highest, happiest feast of Israel's year. Passover was the day that God remembered us and came for us. The temple was the place where the nation gathered to be close to God. The temple is that place where we remember God and come to God. And with everyone else quite happy to be in the temple close to God, it is quite a contrast to the angry Jesus, whip in hand, kicking over tables: *"Get out of here!"*

Elsewhere it is said, "Judgment begins with the household of God." That's why you would probably have preferred that I stuck with the Ten Commandments: Taking God's name in vain! Stealing! Covetousness! You see these are other people's sins, not ours.

If Jesus is going to barge in among us, I'd rather he tamper with your sins, not mine.

In the temple that day he didn't mention taking God's name in vain, stealing, covetousness. He attacked worship. He assaulted religion. I would rather hear Jesus light into the Pharisees for their legalism, the scribes for their snobbishness, or the violent for their violence. But, in this gospel passage he barges in and attacks the religious for our religion. His is not an assault upon the pagan all around us; this is an attack upon the righteous here in the church.

The temple is a place where one goes to meet God. And the Passover is a time to celebrate what God has done for us. Preachers are those who help us be with God. That is why they sometimes say that we pastors are members of the *"helping professions."* We help you to meet God. I am here to provide a service, namely, to help you meet God.

That is all that those merchants were doing in the temple. They were merely providing a much-needed service for the worshipers. Roman coins, the only kind used in Jerusalem, could not get used to pay the temple tax. They had the image of Emperor on them. You could not use those, you needed shekels. So, every time you went to church, if you wanted to offer your money, you had to deal with moneychangers. And if you wanted to offer God an unspotted ox or sheep or pigeon, as Scripture required, then you had to buy one from the temple merchant.

But it seems that all of this commotion in the temple made Jesus very unhappy!

You see? The table that Jesus is turning over is mine! That distant awesome God, the one whom Moses met on the mountain, has been domesticated, tamed to the level of a business transaction. Here, put your money in here and you will get a little dose of the divine.

Does our society have problems? The solution is simple. Just follow the Ten Commandments! They *"make sense."* It pays to do right. Don't kill, don't steal, don't lie. Obey the rules and you will be rewarded with happiness.

Or today, you might hear the preacher say: *"Come to me with your problems. I am your pastor."* So,

you come and say: *"I've got this problem in my life, this decision that I had to make. Pastor, do you think I've done right?"*

And the preacher says: *"Oh, I am sure that you have probably done right. After all, you are in intelligent, sensitive person, I'm sure that you did right."*

See? I am a member of the *"helping professions."*

No agony! No unknowing! No mysterious confusion! No smoke, no command, no screams of slaughtered animals on the altar or blood trickling down marble steps...NO GOD. It is all a transaction.

You put your worries and cares in here and we will send you out with a blessing.

Various persons have said to me over the years: *"I think church is a lot like a filling-station. I come in here on Sunday empty. Then I get filled up with energy to make it through the rest of the week."*

I am supposed to be here helping you to meet God. After all, I am a pastor. And this is Passover, even if we call it Lent. That is, you are supposed to be passing over from death to life, from the enslavement to whatever master's hold you—to the worship of the true, living God.

We have made the temple, the dark temple, into a neighborhood supermarket. Get out of bed, get dressed up, open the hymnal, sing the songs, keep your eyes open while the preacher drones on stand for the benediction....say hello to God, go back home.

And it just made Jesus mad. Just made him mad.

I think John, the Gospel writer, chose to tell this story, this confrontational, disturbing story right up front, at the first because he wanted us to know, right up front, the sort of God who had come among us. If anybody thought that our salvation was coming in the form of a nice young man from the Middle East, come to turn the water into wine at a wedding, invite a few fisher folk to join his prayer group, say things like, *"come unto me, all you heavy laden and I will give you rest,"* they had another thought coming.

John shows us Jesus—the Jesus pounding at the door, brandishing a knotted ship, overturning tables, driving unleashed oxen down the carpeted aisles of University Baptist Church.

That's Jesus. Our petty, polite domestication of his good news, our pretty little cause-effect religion just makes him mad. It is to him a violation of the holiness of God.

God's commands (those commandments I choose not to preach about) are not to be obeyed as a means whereby we might get what we want. We are to obey because this is what a holy God wants.

These commands are not a technique for achieving our selfish desires. They are God's means of revealing our selfish desires and remaking us into his people, people for whom religion is a matter of bending our lives to conform to God's desires rather than a method of achieving desires of our own.

We do not stand, in Lent, before the mirror of our own moral introspection. That would be an easy thing. We stand before a righteous, demanding, accusing God. His standards are not our own. His demands intrude upon our easy complacency, overturning tables, setting wild birds loose, and clanging coins to the floor. His presence is a sting of the whip upon the neck. He barges in here and drives us out of our burrows of religious seclusion.

When they asked Jesus, that day in the temple, what gave him the right to vent his righteous indignation at them Jesus had a strange reply: *"Destroy this temple, and in three days, I'll raise it up."* "Three days? It has taken us forty-six years to build this Chapel!" They said.

Later, much later, after we had dragged him from the temple, stripped him, beat him, hung him on a

cross to die; three days later when he barged forth from this tomb, kicked down the doors of death and was raised to new life, we remembered what he said to us that day in the temple. We asked him for a sign of what real religion was all about. The only sign he gave us was that of death and resurrection; the only temple he left us to draw near to God was that built of his own Body and Blood, a new Passover in which the God who comes to us in the form of his own bloodied Son.

Then we remembered how all this began. It began on that day of disruption in the temple; then we knew, we believed: This Jesus is about something big.

Something so big, that Jesus reminded us the dwelling place of the eternal was to be in the heart and the soul of His people. And God does not want his temple cluttered up with things which keep us from the primary task. That task is to be like Him.

That lesson reminds us that the only way we talk about God in ways we can comprehend is through action words. God is the God who.....brings us out of Egypt. Who makes a covenant with His people.

Who walks with us through the wilderness. Who sent His only son. Who gives us new life in Christ.

Several years ago, now, you may have remembered signs outside United Methodist Churches, the word "open" in their motto. *"Open Hearts, Open Minds and Open Doors."* Some pastors had to

remind their congregations that the word, "open" was to be a verb not an adjective. Because not all of those churches had open door and open minds and open doors. They were to be the people who *"Opened hearts, Opened Minds and Opened Doors"* I think these words can be said of any church.

What makes our Christ so upset with us in our places of worship is that we have so filled our ears and our hearts and souls with other things and have drowned out the words spoken by the prophet Micah.

That prophet said the worship that our God wants is not our comfortable rituals which speak of so much and produce so little. He said to the people who went to the temple: *6 "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? 7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" 8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* All "action" words.

It is my understanding that we worship the God who acts in ways to redeem, The God who forgives, The God who comforts, The God who demands justice, The God who walks with us through the most difficult of times. And it is my understanding that God created us in His image and expects our acts to be the worship we offer to Him. It requires more than just coming here—hearing, singing, and praying, and then going out of here to another week made no different than the past. Jesus drives us out of here with his whip and says this is not what God wants. He wants a people who will humble themselves in contrition and admit we can do better. We can follow more closely the example set for us by his own Son who loved when it was not easy, who bent down and humbly washed the feet of those we thought should be washing ours, who turned the other cheek when we denied him not once but three times, who forgave as many as 70 times 7 times, as a sign of grace, when we dragged him out of our temple and let the soldiers, who did the emperor's bidding, crucify him because we did not like him messing with our worship.

As a part of our Lenten experience, I pray that all of us might be made new in our efforts to follow him more closely.