

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
March 3, 2024
Exodus 20:1-17 and John 2:13–22

A few weeks ago, on Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday just before the start of lent, we talked of mountains. We talked how the transfiguration moment on a mountain apart took our memory back to Mt. Sinai and the moment of light and encounter. Well, we are back to talking about mountains. Our Exodus reading has us back at Mt. Sinai, Moses and God speaking together on the mountain. And our gospel reading has us at Mt. Zion, Jerusalem, the place of worship and pilgrimage.

I started hiking mountains and backpacking in my twenties, I found it exhilarating and rejuvenating. I was in my first job in Binghamton, NY, starting a Young Life ministry from scratch, and a youth group from a handful of loosely connected kids. By the end my first year as an independent adult, I was tired, worn down, discouraged, and genuinely unsure of how it all was going to go. I had to go to the Adirondacks for a YL leadership retreat that September. So, I went a few days earlier hoping to do some hiking in the mountains, using my first vacation time. So, I disappeared into the mountains with a borrowed backpack and a few bleak provisions. I had grown up outside, but I knew nothing of tech-wick clothing and all that fancy stuff. I hiked in with my denim and cotton, and thankfully it didn't rain. It was my first, and therefore purist moment, of reaching the top exhausted, and sucking in the air and the views and the quiet created by that whistling wind.

I was hooked. I loved the clean cold air. I loved being back in far enough that you couldn't hear the noises of cars, far enough in where the majority of other hikers did not go. It was a reprieve. I was young enough so that I could hike long miles and not wake up feeling like my feet had been caned. An uncorrupted wilderness, it felt. Pure. A place where your heart could speak, where your heart felt less encumbered by the stress of life, where standing on a peak felt almost like Moses on the mountain.

Over the years, I found that pure experience harder to replicate. It happened at times, like when I summited Mt. Harvard, my first fourteener, about twenty-five years ago with my cousin Nathan. It became harder to separate the busy world of relationships and work and things that break from that pure moment away on the mountain, harder to leave it all behind, the stress still lingered a bit. It became harder to separate the world of human action from the pure silence of the back-country. Even back then in my years of trekking the Adirondack mountains I was aware that many of the lakes in the High Peak region had no fish in them because

of acid rain, the effect of air pollution from the factories along Great Lakes to the west. These pure places were not as pure as I wanted to imagine. But even so, life felt simpler in the backcountry. Only a few essential things on your back.

Well, Moses' journey was more complicated than my treks up the mountain. He was leading a people out a place that was both the entire world they knew, and a place of oppression; they were tired, beleaguered, worn-down. He was leading a people through a wilderness where water was not abundant, and where they felt inclined to grumble and mope every time they had to wait for dinner. He was leading a people who oscillated between hope and terror. But even amidst the difficult journey of leading an enslaved people through a freely wild place, towards a land God had promised them, Moses gets a pure moment away, a mountaintop moment of clarity, a restorative breath of high mountain air.

I say pure, because Moses gets what many want, and what even more claim to have. He gets an unmediated word from the Lord, untainted by the noise and confusion and muddiness of life. He gets ten words (devarim) for what the people should be, straight from the mouth of God. No interpreters. No thousands of years in the middle. Not a thousand different contexts and articulations to filter down through. A word straight from the mouth of God.

And yet, even that proved difficult. By the time Moses got to the bottom of the mountain it all had gone wonky. In the story of the golden calf, which we have talked about recently and which takes place as Moses is coming down from the mountain, that moment of revelation is dissolved into chaos, the moment offset by anxious behavior. The people were reared in stress and trained to respond in particular ways. The chaos plays out, and they are even scared at the notion of such direct contact with God. They insist that only Moses speaks to them. They want a degree of separation from God.

It was hard even then, to settle into the vision of Loving God with their whole beings, accepting the ways God was going to be with them and that he would not abandon them. They had a hard time settling into being a community in and for each other, loving each other as themselves. It was hard to press into that calling and to move towards the future God imagined for them. But it only gets harder over time.

By the time we get to our gospel passage, we have a glimpse into the messy result of revelation passed down and appropriated through generations, and through interpretation after interpretation, through various contexts and cultural expressions, through disaster and rebuilding, through independence and

occupation, and on and on. Over a thousand more years of history to this relationship. That pure kernel of the God-human enterprise discussed with God and Moses on Sinai is now a much more complicated and human institution.

Now people trek up the mountain of Zion, Jerusalem. But it is not a lonely trailhead, it is likely I-70 on a Friday in the summer, but everyone is on foot. It has become a tradition shared by families, building memories of walking together with aunts and uncles, and cousins, singing the songs of Zion. The noise of it all had become part of it all. Crowds, singing. The long trek, the big city, the sights and sounds. People coming from every corner of the world with their own languages and dialects, their own clothing and spices.

Now hordes of pilgrims stream into the city, and the smell of continual burnt offerings fills the air, a haze of smoke, as the priests churn out the sacrifices, one after the other, trying to keep up with the demand like an open air slaughter house and firehouse bbq all in one. The temple courts are crowded and noisy. Around the base of the temple mount are booths and shops. Economics too have become entwined in the whole Passover experience. If you came all this way and do not have a sacrificial animal, or one that cannot pass priestly inspection, you can conveniently acquire one there at the base of the temple. But like buying a hotdog at a base-ball game, you do so at price. And if you do not have the local currency to buy your over-priced animal, there is a convenient exchange booth, at a very “competitive” rate; something like a pay-day lender.

Passover had become its own circus. long lines. complicated processes. An economic reality with opportunists seeing a chance to make money with little if any interest in the event itself. Rome hovering over, making sure there is no ruckus during what they must have considered an obnoxious festival.

That pure kernel of the God-human conversation was still there, that desire to be close to God, and to hear in a new way was still there—that is why these pilgrims come from near and far. However, it is all obscured and overtaken now by human, political and economic realities. And so when Jesus walks amid this row of “people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables,” he is grieved and he is agitated. He sees it, and he reacts to it.

It happens, doesn't it. We have institutions, programs, and traditions that were created with a clear purpose, a clear need in mind. The church is a place we have all been involved and served. And perhaps you have been one to get so involved in all the tasks and things that need to be done as the institution grows – someone has to clean, someone has to update the records, and deal with the leaking roof and the

sound system and the communion preparations and the tuning of the piano and on and on and on we could go. And at some point, you start to get worn down, cranky, irritated. The whole purpose of the church was to draw you closer to the Lord and to each other, and yet that mountain experience no longer peels off the stress; rather, it has become a stress.

This process is slow and hard to detect sometimes, like boiling a frog, or like the slow advancement of a cataract, slowing dulling your vision so that you don't really remember what things use to look like.

Jesus sees the ways that this tradition has grown into a giant operation. He sees how it has been complicated and how it has been corrupted, how it has all gone wonky. And, Jesus is the type who stands on the Mount of Olives and looks over the valley, and rather than being caught up in the festival and its traditions and its noises, he weeps over the sight of the city. He is an idealist who has some picture in mind of what this holy city was supposed to be. He is the type who feels the pain people experience. He is the type to grieve over the unjust institutions and practices that have become part and parcel of the Passover celebration. So, this busy flurry of unthinking activity is a lot to take for one like Jesus.

So, he reacts, he drives out those who want to capitalize on a captive audience, but who do not care about the Passover itself, or the people. He calls out those who have turned the Passover into this circus. He reminds those listening what this place is supposed to be. A house of prayer. A place to commune, to connect, to be reconciled and to hear.

Now Jesus calls attention to it here. He makes a demonstration. He creates a mess. But I have a hard time thinking he actually ended the practices he is confronting. He called attention to what needed to be changed and renewed, but throwing a bunch of tables over probably isn't what will renew people's connection to God, or desire to be in a house of prayer.

What is it that might clear the air, that might renew in us the connection, the spiritual journey, the worship? I chose the poem this morning for that notion of being reminded what you have lost over time. Of a renewed perspective, a renewed clarity.

Her lenses, implanted
To uncloud aging eyes,
Sparkle now like a bit
Of glitter on a card,

Rhinestones on a T-shirt

Twinkle in her eye. An old cliché
Common long before
Surgery was routine, suggesting
Joy or affection—intangibles
That lift heels off concrete,
Make us notice yellow petals
Pushing through sidewalk cracks.

My grandmother
Now visits museums again,
Marvels at details, stops to read
Each acrylic label on the wall.

In the midst of all that my cloud our experiences and visions, our calendar and our volunteerism, our thoughts and our prayers, Jesus' moment at the base of the temple is a reminder to all of us to disrupt the parade, to call us back to that foundational purpose – to be a house of prayer, a place of connection, a pinnacle reminder to Love the Lord your God with your whole self, and your neighbor as yourself.

The forty days of lent are patterned after the forty years in the wilderness, an invitation to go to a less complicated place to rediscover what it is to follow the Lord, to rely on the Lord for direction and provision and to get back to the law of the Lord, 10 words that Jesus boils down to two, Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Forty days to renew our hearing and our vision and the passion we once felt, so that we might go back to our life and involvements renewed, reminded of what it is all about.

And all God's children said...

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

(Mt 21:12–17; Mk 11:15–19; Lk 19:45–48)

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?”

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

²⁰ The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² After 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 Ten Commandments

(Deut 5:1–22)

20 Then God spoke all these words: ² I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³ you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸ Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹² Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³ You shall not murder.

¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ You shall not steal.

¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

¹⁸ When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, ¹⁹ and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." ²⁰ Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin." ²¹ Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.