

Sermon – John 2:13-22; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

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Grace Lutheran Church

3 Lent – Year B

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“Festival Foolishness”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I love the deep snows of winter, falling with beauty and covering the earth in a drifting, protective blanket. And I delight in the absence of snow once it gives way to the first green shoots of spring. What I don't particularly enjoy is the melting of the snow, the in-between time and what it reveals. Over the past week, as the snows have receded from our yard, we've discovered detritus, both foreign and domestic. Some of our own items have emerged: portable hockey goals, a waterlogged baseball, and, somewhat inexplicably, a pair of swim goggles, among other things. We've also discovered junk that wasn't ours, most notably some plastic bags and Styrofoam food containers revealed by the melting snow in our front yard. I'm sure they weren't there before the blizzard. Did someone eat lunch and then litter in our yard *during* the snowstorm? I imagine we'll never know. The melting of the snow is necessary for the clean freshness of spring that will follow, but what it reveals in the meantime can be troubling. In the same way, many of us are beginning the work of spring cleaning. Once you start looking for dirt and grime to clean, what was easy to ignore a few weeks ago is now impossible to miss. The mess is everywhere.
2. Early in his ministry, Jesus goes up to Jerusalem for Passover. There he finds a system that's been churning on for centuries. On the surface, all seems to be well, even in accord with God's commands. But when Jesus arrives, the veneer of holiness melts away and the dirt and grime of human sin and greed

become impossible to miss. Cattle, sheep, and doves are penned within the temple's Court of the Gentiles, available for purchase by pilgrims to offer in sacrifice for atonement and purification. Sacrifice was a non-stop process; in addition to these particular sacrifices, animals were offered daily, funded by a temple tax. This tax could not be paid using coins bearing the image of Caesar, so Jews had to exchange their coins for Tyrian shekels. But as anyone who's ever exchanged money in an airport can tell you, you're not likely to get a good rate when you need money the most. In both the exchange of coinage and the purchase of animals, it seems, the problem was price gouging. The offering of first fruits, of flocks or bank accounts, had become a system of buying and selling and, shocking as it may be to imagine, the sellers always came out far ahead. What was designed to be a place where weary, yearning pilgrims could enter God's presence and receive forgiveness had decayed into a place of profit where, with God's grace put up for sale, the house always won. It might have looked good on the surface, or from a distance, but seen up close in the light of God's Son, the whole thing was revealed as a degenerate mess.

3. Jesus, whip in hand, engages in some spring cleaning. In what must have been a chaotic cacophony, Jesus drives forth the livestock and the money changers, pours out the coins, and flips over their tables. Those present must have been beside themselves. Who was this? What right did he have to do such a thing? Rather than asking his identity, they want Jesus to authenticate his authority: "What sign can you show us for doing this?" "Destroy this temple," Jesus responds, "and in three days I will raise it up." It is a foolish thing to say, at a festival or any other time, but his hearers don't yet understand the half of it. They think he's referring to the merely impossible task of constructing a new temple in a few days' time. What they'll learn only later is that he's actually speaking of the foolishly impossible act of rising from the dead. He's come not simply to overturn the tables and send the sellers running. Christ has come to overturn death itself, to cast out its minions, sin and evil. Christ has

- come to set people free by the power of a grace that is free, flowing from the last sacrifice ever needed: Christ on the cross, demonstrating the power, love, and glory of our God.
4. Here, at the beginning of the story, Jesus makes bold to declare that he is the new temple. In interrupting the sacrificial system now, he points to the time when he will interrupt it forever, as no sacrifice beyond his own death as the Passover Lamb will be needed again. In naming himself as the new temple, he declares that God's glory will no longer found by pilgrims making their way to the temple in Jerusalem, but is a glory found now in the Shepherd who reverses the pilgrim journey, finding each of us right where we are. In pointing to himself as the rebuilt, resurrected temple, he claims that the unity of God's people is to be found in him alone. In the resurrected Christ, what it means to be God's people is radically upended and expanded. Where once the temple's concentric courts served to limit access, now in Christ the glory of God's Kingdom is made manifest in all times and places. Here at the first Passover of his ministry, Jesus reveals what will happen at the last Passover of his ministry. He goes up for the festival and plays the fool, overturning and upending this world in the process.
  5. It's only foolishness, of course, if you're beholden to, bound by, or benefitting from the old ways of this world's so-called wisdom. As Paul points out, the cross is a far greater foolishness than Christ's anger in the temple. It's always tempting to reinforce a system in which we can better ourselves and appease the divine, be it the sacrificial system of the temple or the health-and-wealth self-improvement messages that pass themselves off as gospel in our day. But it is Christ and him crucified who saves us, however foolish it may appear. Paul writes that we are "being saved" as if it is an ongoing act, which of course it is. Whereas once sacrifices were offered daily for the forgiveness of sins, so now we die and rise daily in the waters of baptism. As Jeff Paschal

writes, "Day by day, we are a people being saved from cramped little lives of selfishness and saved for the broad, roomy, loving discipleship of the cross."

6. Being saved by Jesus, we are freed to receive anew the gift of God's covenantal law. Being the incurable egoists that we are, we continue to believe that the law is about what I can or can't do, or about what you owe to me. It is the refusal to wear a mask, without a medical exemption, simply because someone doesn't want to be told what to do. God's Law, given at Sinai, is about so much more than this; it is the foolish vision set forth by God that *I* am not the most important person. The Ten Commandments in their entirety are a declaration that both God and neighbor matter more to me than me. In our desire to sin, we see God's Law as nothing but an attack on our freedom. Killed and made alive again in Christ, we can receive the Law for what it is: not as limitation but invitation. God binds Godself to the people as their God, *our* God. The Law tells us what it looks like to live in the way God intends, a way of life that leads to flourishing and freedom. To this world's me-first mentality, putting God first and neighbor before self is foolish. But we have been tripped by the stumbling block of the cross and raised to newness of life. If this is foolishness, let us be holy fools for the sake of Christ and community.
7. As we continue in Lent, we see Jesus come into our lives today. His presence melts our pretense, revealing within us that which needs cleansing and crucifying. Amazingly, instead of telling us to get to work and clean up our act, he declares that the temple is going out of business. The sales department is shutting down. From now on, salvation and grace are the free gifts of our God, given and guaranteed by the Christ who is now the temple of God's glory, raised up anew in three days.
8. I'm not sure when I'll eat in a restaurant again, let alone one fancy enough to have my table crumbed. The preacher Emily Ann Davis uses this delightful

image of a waiter who comes to the table between courses to sweep away the debris. The idea is to help guests focus on the good things that have been prepared, not the leftover clutter of before. Today we see a table set with covenant and liberation, with the foolishness of the cross and its power made known in weakness, with the mysterious promise of resurrection. Davis writes, "each one calls our attention away from the crummy distractions of pride and preoccupation so that we can begin to really see." Friends, as Christ cleansed the temple, so does he come to wash you of your sin and chase you out of death and into life. We might have preferred to keep sin and death buried, but the Son comes to melt them away, making the way for the fresh, green spring of resurrection, just around the corner. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.