



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
“At Home” Worship
March 7, 2021
First Sunday of Lent

Leading in Worship Today:
Ursula Damgaard, Director of Music
The Rev. Marta Z. Ukropina
Liturgist: Lizzie Dhungana
Vocalists: Tom and Katie Stocks

Gathering Around God’s Word

Call to Worship

We worship in the season of Lent,
a time to examine our hearts and our lives,
**and journey with Christ through the suffering of
the world.**

Let us listen for the commandments of God
and align our lives with God’s vision for peace.
God has marked us as beloved dust
and called us together to worship.

Opening Hymn

Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah #65

Call to Confession

Despite all that God has taught us, we still act

foolishly; we are still weak. In the cross of Christ, we find forgiveness and grace. We confess our sins, trusting in God's wisdom and strength rather than our own.

Prayer of Confession

Merciful God, how fickle we are; we sin against you without even knowing it. Clear us, we pray, of any unknown sin, and save us from willfully ignoring your way. Let your commandments rule and guide us. Forgive us for worshiping anyone or anything except you; keep us faithful. Forgive us for failing to honor all our relationships—with those closest to us and those who are distant neighbors. Help us to speak words of blessing and kindness, rather than words that belittle or destroy. Turn us away from violence, falsehood, and selfishness. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Brothers and sisters, in Jesus Christ, crucified, risen and coming again, we are forgiven and set free to live in faithfulness with God and with one another. Thanks be to God. Amen.

The Word

Prayer for Illumination

Holy Spirit of God, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Scripture Readings

Old Testament Reading: Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. 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. 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, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. 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. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 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. 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.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 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.

New Testament Reading: John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. 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. He told those who were selling the doves, ‘Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!’ His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’ The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 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.

Anthem

In This Quiet Moment

Sermon

“Overturning Tables”

The Rev. Marta Z. Ukropina

True confession: Every time I encounter this text I start to sing: Jesus Christ, Superstar. I honestly can’t help it. I immediately see the scene from the 1970’s musical. Leave it to Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice to provide lyrics and music that I have a hard time getting out of my head! In Seminary, David and I took a class called Jesus and His Interpreters which looked at images of Christ in society, art, literature, history and pop culture. I remember we watched this movie as a part of the class examining it and discussing it. Maybe that is why the scene comes to my mind so readily—because it isn’t my favorite musical or anything (That’s actually *The Phantom of the Opera*).

In the scene all the money changers and vendors outside the temple are in their 70's best hair and clothing styles, singing and dancing. One of my personal favorites is the display of postcards—it is almost like the temple has been turned into a tourist trap selling all sorts of worthless souvenirs in the name of worshipping God. And then good looking, movie star Jesus comes and overturns the tables, causes destruction and havoc to their activities and they clear out—astonished and scared. And he sings: “My temple should be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves.”

Say what you will about the musical, but some of this scene helps capture why Jesus was so upset with what was going on in front of the temple.

Back to the telling of this story in John. Texts like this can often make us uncomfortable because we see a side of Jesus that is more confrontational. I mean goodness—he makes a whip out of cords. That is certainly a far cry from the picture of Jesus welcoming children on his knee! It is not a peaceful encounter.

It's not like watching a movie and cheering when the bad guys get what is coming to them. Because if we are honest, we realize that we probably have been just as guilty as the money changers, vendors and worshipers at the temple—transforming what is to be a sacred place into a space that fits our own selfish needs or looks to fulfill the demands of society.

Their motive wasn't inherently wrong. They were trying to make sure the temple was able to function and thrive. They were selling sacrificial animals to the pilgrims because it would have been hard to bring an unblemished animal on a journey. They needed an unblemished, clean animal for a temple sacrifice. Likewise, there were money changers because the temple tax had to be paid in temple coinage. They were simply trying to make sure the temple functioned as it should—

or perhaps as they thought or interpreted it should. But somewhere in all that, they lost the purpose.

All of this still holds true today. The ways of the world continue to invade the church. Maybe it isn't intentional, but it happens. One example I always think about is the constant discussion in the church about defining success in numbers. I cannot tell you how many times I heard that as a church we shouldn't judge success in numbers but then the very next comment is always about how important numbers are to a successful church.

No one can argue that we live in a world where numbers define success. From likes and followers on social media, to salaries, to sports wins, to attendance at events, our society is driven by numbers. I have seen churches get lost in this, too. One example is a church that I knew who hid two tickets to the Super Bowl under seats in the sanctuary that they were going to give away during worship. I think it was the same church that gave away new X-Box gaming systems to a handful of youth who attended their youth group kick off. They were gimmicks to get people in the door. People flocked to these church events but to me—they looked an awful lot like vendors outside the temple. I am sure their motives were not wrong—they merely wanted to get more people to the church in hopes that once they got them in they would stay and become a part of the worshipping community. But it sure felt like an empty gimmick to me.

Of course, if we are honest, we all fall prey to this type of thing. One of the first questions I get from others, lay and clergy alike, is—how big is your church, or how many people do you have in worship? Or what is your yearly budget? How many kids does your church have? How do you get young families in the door? All of those questions are questions rooted in numbers. And really if you think about it—why do we base our “success” on numbers?

Because really numbers do not matter. What matters is that the church is doing its work, serving those in need, teaching about God—worshipping Him. I really don't think God cares if your church has 5 or 5,000 people. What God cares about is faithful service and worship. As Jesus said: where two or three are gathered, I am there. But don't get me wrong—I am well aware that numbers do matter. You can't operate the church or its missions without a successful stewardship campaign and healthy budget. You can't have a Sunday School class without any students. A large sanctuary with a handful of people feels depressing.

Numbers are a never ending debate. And numbers are important because the church does exist within the context of a greater society. For a church to exist, it needs to be able to pay bills, provide ministries, etc. And to do all that it needs a certain number of people to do the work and it needs a certain amount of money to operate. We have all seen the pain that goes hand in hand with a church that has to close because it doesn't have enough "numbers." But numbers should not be what defines us.

What if instead of asking the number questions we asked questions like: Why do you like your church? Why are you a member there? What makes your church look like the body of Christ in the world? Why do you worship God? Why is your faith important to you? How do you see God at work through your church?

Really we need to refocus and remember that what is most important is the question: What does God want? And to answer most simply: God wants our hearts. God wants our time. God wants our worship and prayer. God want us to follow Him. And what if we imagined Jesus entering our own sanctuaries and overturning our tables of cherished traditions, or ways of doing things or pessimistic attitudes? What would Jesus tell us?

We are living in a unique time to be thinking about this. With the pandemic, we have not worshipped in the sanctuary in one year. Most of you haven't been in the church building for the duration of this time. We have been worshipping at home—a very different experience, indeed.

But what a great time for us to think and examine how we do church. What a great time to imagine Jesus entering through the doors at Westminster Presbyterian Church. What will he find that makes him say “well done, good and faithful servant?” And what will he find that will make him want to overturn the table or crack the whip?

When we all finally gather together again we must remember to focus on God—making our church a place for prayer, worship and service. Maybe instead of comparing ourselves to other churches, we should focus on what we do faithfully and well. We need to focus instead on how God is working with and through all of us. When we come back together there will be great joy as we see friends we haven't seen in a long time.

But who else will we see? Maybe this is a perfect time to get to know someone new or welcome a stranger. Maybe it is a perfect time to look at our church with fresh eyes and think about how it looks to someone walking through the door for the very first time. And more importantly how we, the people of WPC, welcome and greet someone who comes in for the very first time. And by welcome, I am talking about welcoming that goes beyond a friendly hello with a smile.

When we come back together, maybe it is time to say “yes.” When God calls you to service as a deacon, elder, committee member, Sunday School teacher, youth leader, choir member, and so on and so on, instead of thinking “why me?” or, “I'm too busy” or “I've been there, done

that” maybe it is time to say—“Yes, with the Spirit’s help, I will.”

When we come back together maybe instead of looking to do things the way we have “always done them,” we lean into the Spirit’s calling. We listen for that still, small voice or loud rush of the wind that may be calling us to new and possibly uncomfortable things. Maybe it will be time for us to close a chapter on something while opening a new chapter on something else. If you think I am being vague, that is because I am. I want to encourage all of us over the course of the next few months to think about and pray about these things. In some ways, it is an amazing gift to think about coming back to church and celebrating a new beginning. We all have work to do together—to vision—to dream—to come back together and transform the church into where God is calling the church post-pandemic.

Jesus said: “destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” yet again puzzling those in his midst as he alludes to what is coming. As Christians journeying through Lent in the year 2021 we are reminded that the story does not end there. The cross is coming, but so is the joy of the empty tomb. The pandemic has caused us to live in the pain and sadness of Good Friday for a long time, but the joy and hope of Easter is coming. When we gather again to worship in person it will be a real resurrection moment—a true celebration and time of joy.

So take some time before we re-open the doors to in-person worship and pray and listen. Pray that you and the church as a whole would hear where God is calling us. It may be more than time to overturn the old tables and live into the promises of a new beginning given to all of us in Christ.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Responding to God’s Word

Affirmation of Faith

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer

Jesus, remember us when you come into your kingdom. Hear our intercessions. For your church around the world,
We ask new life.
For all who carry out ministries in your church,
We ask grace and wisdom.
For people who accepted spiritual disciplines,
We ask inspired discipleship.
For your church everywhere,
We ask new unity in your name.
For those who cannot believe,
We ask your faithful love.
For governors and rulers in every land,
We ask your guidance.
For people who suffer and sorrow,
We ask your healing peace.
Hear us as we lift prayers before you now in silence.
(time for silent prayer)
Holy God, your Word, Jesus Christ spoke peace to a sinful world and brought humanity the gift of

reconciliation by the suffering and death he endured. Teach those who bear his name to follow the example he gave us. May our faith, hope and charity turn hatred to love, conflict to peace and death to eternal life; In the name of Christ who taught us to pray..

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Closing Hymn: *I Danced in the Morning* #157

Benediction

In the Lenten week ahead, find time and space to listen for God and worship God. And may God shine upon you, Christ fill you with wisdom and strength, and the Holy Spirit guide you into all faithfulness, now and forever. Amen.