

March 3, 2024
The Third Sunday in Lent, Year B
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22

In the Name of the One, True God. Amen.

The scene in the Temple that St. John paints for us is full of a kind of busyness that makes me think of a factory. I don't have experience with factories like Canpack, or Ball, or GM, but I do have a very strong memory of a grade school trip to downtown St. Louis to the Hostess Bakery.

We followed our guide in single file, wowed by an army of women and men in white uniforms and cotton gloves frantically packaging Twinkies, Cupcakes, and Fruit Pies as they whizzed by on conveyor belts, often over our heads. We also got to see an enormous area where loaves of Wonder Bread moved from mixing to baking to bagging. Everywhere, there were people rushing around, loud noises from the machines, and the unforgettable, almost oppressive, aroma of yeast.

I imagine that in Jesus' time, going up to the Jerusalem Temple at Passover was probably more like the hustle and bustle and smell of that Hostess factory than it is to slip into a pew in any of the nice tidy churches that we all know and love.

And what were they producing in this great 'factory' in the Temple in Jerusalem? They were making religion. Just as a bakery makes bread, the Temple made religion. The Temple was humming with activity all the time. During the great pilgrimage festivals, especially Passover, hundreds of priests would have been working every day, slaughtering the animals for sacrifice. They were producing religion; creating a product with which God might be suitably impressed.¹

Now, if you think that I say this as a finger-pointing condemnation of Israelite Temple worship, I do not. After all, how many small, quiet churches have we attended in our lives where we were just as busy "making nice" for God an hour a week? Worshiping with our outsides, while letting our insides remain cold and unconverted?

¹ The Rt. Rev. Rowan Williams preached a sermon called "Surprised by the Cross" on March 11, 2012 at Saint Paul's Within-the-Walls Episcopal Church in Rome. The architecture and much of the thought in this sermon relies on his work, to which the author is deeply indebted.

There is a thread that runs through our lessons today: the difference between the kind of ‘religion’ that we make in religion factories, and the worship of the true God.

Right from the get-go in the Ten Commandments, we are warned not to put anything in the place of the true God – the God of mystery, chaos, beauty, and freedom. We are commanded not to create images of God from the world as we understand it, a god that we can get our arms around. We are cautioned about creating projections of our perceptions and our preferences – all designed to make us feel safe and happy...and holy.

But having produced something religious, we’re all set. Because, when that empty hole within us begins to itch again,² we can pull that manufactured god out of our back pocket, and fall down and worship it. This is Idolatry, with a capital “I”.

St. Paul warns the Corinthians about the same thing. God’s wisdom and power are so different from what the world imagines wisdom and power to be. No wonder we say, “thanks very much, I’ll settle for the wisdom and power that I can control.”

As a result, we scurry around, seeking signs from a God that we think should be at our beck and call, or proof of God’s wisdom from human philosophy, all in the hope of making us feel safer and more comfortable.

But today’s Collect reminds us that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves. That power belongs to the true God, who has been made known to us on the Cross in the self-offering love of Jesus Christ. Here is the challenge of our lessons today: idolatry or truth? The religion factory or the Cross of Christ?

When we are confronted with the Cross, when we experience the Cross as a roadblock, as we discussed last week, it is always tempting to head back to the religion factory. For all its noise, and discomfort and smell, we know what to expect...and that reliability calms us. We know we’re doing something; we tell ourselves that God couldn’t possibly refuse to love us...we’re so busy.

But we are commanded to make no idols – no gods of our own making, whether they are golden calves or gold stars. That gap, that hole, that space within each of us, is

² Derived from French mathematician and theologian Blaise Pascal (1623-1662). “What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.” *Pensées* VII (425).

reserved for the true God. The God who risks everything by stepping down into our world, by living a human life in Jesus, and by dying a human death on the Cross.

Why, we ask, would God take that risk? Simply to show us that the love that God bears for us cannot be frustrated or defeated by anything that we call failure. Not even the cruelest violence that we can devise and execute.

Rowan Williams, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, puts it this way: "God remains God on the Cross of Jesus Christ, and because God is God at that moment, Jesus Christ is risen from the dead."

During Lent, we are invited to look inside ourselves and ask how often we punch the timeclock at the religion factory, manufacturing the gods that suit us. Every Lent is an invitation to take a step back from the idolatry that imprisons us behind a wall of our own making between us and God.

During Lent, we have the opportunity to be surprised by the Cross again, to reconsider what we think we know about the Cross. Here at Grace, there are two different ways to see the Cross. One, the Budded Cross, is empty and speaks of the Risen Christ. The other is weighed down with the body of our crucified Lord. Each is valid. Both are true. Perhaps they are most true together. After all, there can be no resurrection without the crucifixion.

Maybe this is the surprising reality of what the Cross is: God in Jesus Christ, overturning everything that we think we know about life and death, about success and security, everything, even, that we think about 'religion' as something that's good for us.

In the Cross (maybe from the Cross), God is calling us away from the factory into faith; calling us to trust in God's unbreakable, undefeatable love. Calling us to be motivated by that trust to go out into the world each day to serve the least and the lost, the forgotten Children of God.

We move from the factory into service for the life of the world not to win God's favor, but to express gratitude for God's generosity to us, and to pass on that generosity to God's beloved world.

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When Jesus cleared the vendors out the temple, when he threw out the factory staff, I picture him standing with his friends in a great silence and a great space. Rowan Williams suggests that Jesus says, "this is the space where all people may feel at home; this is a space large enough for everyone to come because this is where God lives. This is where God is at home, and this is where all human beings may be at home."

Jesus Christ, chosen by God, is the sure foundation of that Temple. For, you see, the temple, the true temple, is the space Jesus clears – the temple of his body. Christ makes room for all of us, gathering us in his own presence and prayer before God the Father.

When you and I gather together to worship God, when we reassemble, when we re-member, the body of Christ, we come into that great space which Jesus has cleared. Here, in this space, we are able to stand before God, not frantically busy, not anxious about what we're producing, or obsessed with how we're succeeding. But here we are – still, listening, receiving. Our hands are no longer busy trying to shape God into our image. Instead, they are open, empty, ready to accept the gift of God's grace.

Today, the scriptures challenge us to look into our hearts to see just how busy we have been in 'making religion', and, maybe, to try a little bit of spring-cleaning, a little bit of stillness and open-handedness. And, as you would prepare the ground for your spring garden, clear a space for the grace of God to enter in, with all of its mystery, chaos, beauty, freedom, and, above all, love. Love that can never be defeated, love that can never die. Amen.