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St. Margaret's Church
Lent IIIB, March 15, 2009
John 2:13-22 & Exodus 20:1-17

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

Now there are probably only a handful of us here this morning who find this gospel from John comforting. At first it seems threatening, not comforting. It is filled with anger and the anger of Jesus no less. Confronting anger makes everyone uncomfortable in fact. Confronting the anger of other people. Confronting our own.

And yet here Jesus comes into the temple ticked off in the worst way. What kind of day had he had? Well, he should have been pretty relaxed. In the preceding chapter he has just been to that wonderful wedding banquet in Cana where he made several hundred gallons of wine to save the day. Then it says that “he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there a few days.” (John 2:12) He should have been well-rested from his little Spring Break. Not even a single fight with a Pharisee. But then he made his way back to Jerusalem.

He shows up and doesn't even take the time to get a bulletin from the usher. No “Good morning, how are you doing. Beautiful day today.” He's just angry, and he's on a mission. He's that kind of angry when someone you deeply care about is really screwing up. It's that type of anger that parents and children know a great deal about.

Jesus gets so ticked off that he makes a weapon and drives everyone out. It's not our typical image of Jesus. No children sitting in his lap, no miracle being performed. No sermon drawing huge crowds of people. This anger is a different side of Jesus we haven't experienced yet. **And I love it!** Turns out this Jesus fellow is a lot more like us than we thought.

An angry Jesus in my mind is a great gift. If Jesus is supposed to bridge the gap between God and us, then his anger is necessary. He shows us that he is truly human. If this Jesus can get upset with what some moneychangers were doing in his Father's house, then maybe this Jesus can understand what I go through when I get upset. **Now** we don't have to hide. Maybe this Jesus understands our anger from time to time, and maybe he has something that can help us in our own trials and tribulations.

I find that comforting. But there has to be more. What really **made** him mad? Well, it's pretty simple. The people in the temple were making a business out of religion. They had lost their focus. They had made the temple about them and not about God. They weren't following the will of God; they were following the will of money and their own selfish ambitions. The temple had lost its mission, and Jesus came in and turned it upside down.

He set things right, and the people had to change.

Now we don't exactly know what happened after this incident because the next story is about Nicodemus. I wonder if this temple eventually get torn down? Was it condemned? Did anyone dare to enter it after Jesus had trashed the place? Or did some people really start to get busy? Did they realize what they had done? Did some people get some brooms and start cleaning up the mess? Did they light the candles again and set the chairs straight and pray about their mission and start a search committee for a new rabbi?

Did some new leaders emerge? It happens -- you know -- churches that are close to dying somehow see the light and new life emerges after they thought they had come to a dead end. Maybe, just maybe, Jesus had shaken this community up enough to give them a kick in the right direction.

Maybe this community took some time to discern who they really were and what their mission was going to be for the future. Maybe they realized where their blessings really were coming from. Maybe they realized that those blessings were abundant and that they came directly from God. Maybe, just maybe, they refocused their energy and stopped looking inward. Maybe they started reaching out and realized that they were God's people and that they could only be about God's work in the world.

I wonder what Jesus would do if he walked down the aisle of our temple today? Would he be pleased with our worship and with our songs and prayers? I like to think he would. Would he be pleased with how we treat one another? Well, for the most part I think he would. He'd probably give us a few pointers. Would he be pleased at our giving and how we share our gifts with the world? We'll always have work to do there. Would he come to the altar and break bread together with us. You bet.

But would he get angry at some of our actions? I think so. What have you been doing with this beautiful earth of mine? It's being destroyed. What about those trillions of dollars you are balancing on the backs of the poor and the least of these? What about those millions of people without decent health care? And this whole war thing. It's been way too long. There are some better ways, so get your act together. **We get the point Jesus.**

Or do we?

Well, just in case we don't get the way Jesus wants us to live, we are reminded that we should always go back to the basics. We hear once again the Ten Commandments as handed down to Moses in the book of Exodus. I was down at St. James' Church in Lothian this week, and in their old colonial church they still have them written on the wall. It's probably not a bad idea. I bet that most of us Episcopalians would take more than a minute to remember them all. In these Ten rules as Luther once said, God' speaks to us all in 'baby talk.' God speaks to us as a parent speaks to a child. Direct and to the point.

We don't really like anyone telling us what to do. When we think about laws and rules we sometimes wander off and don't think those rules are for us. But in fact, many of us need some succinct language in our lives. In our chaotic, confusing and crazy lives, it's somewhat comforting to hear God teach us and show us in simple straight-forward ways how to live. God loved us enough to give us some ways to live our lives in words we could understand.

In these words, God tells us the facts of life. If we live by these ways, we will find life. If we wander and get muddled down in moral complexities, we will surely find death.

This law is what Israel called 'Torah.' Torah means 'the way' or even more literally 'the finger pointing the way.' These are the very proof of God's abundant grace. They are not unfair or biased. They are not restricting or cast down upon us. The grace of God does not leave us wandering out on our own but rather shows us the way and urges us to take our first steps. God is the parent who teaches us a way to life, not abandoning us to figure out this world by trial and error.

You might think that such ancient laws passed down thousands of years ago would not still be alive and valid today. And yet so many sad lives and stories on the front page of our newspapers today prove the very point that these rules are not dated but in fact even more

compelling. By God's abundant grace we are shown the way of life and the way the world actually works so that we do not have to discover it ourselves.

Fidelity makes you happy. Living lives of peacefulness and honoring your dealings with others, honoring our elders and our parents and not taking what is not ours are all means of happiness. These ways lead to life. They are not restrictions on our freedom to think and act but the finger pointing the way.

Elza and Sam, this is a great day for us and we celebrate your journey into adulthood. We are watching all of these wonderful changes going on in your bodies, in your personalities, and in this community. We are so blessed to have you as part of this community. We are blessed with your many talents of humor, wit, beauty, leadership and charm. We stand beside you today and say that we will walk with you as you continue to go through these changes in your lives. We will help you on the day after, and the day after that, and the day after that.

This community will remind you that your thoughts are not God's thoughts and that your agendas are not God's agendas. This community will reassure you that you are God's beloved, and that God has great plans in store for you. This community will remind you of the vows you made at your baptisms, and this community will help you live up to those vows.

You are God's chosen and God's beloved. You are our chosen and our beloved. We place a great deal of faith in you, and we believe in your futures. If we didn't, we wouldn't be here today. In you we also place a great deal of hope, but we know you will not always be perfect. God knows that too. We will be here even when you mess up, and we will pick you back up and point you back to the way.

That's what happened in that temple in Jerusalem. Jesus came in and saw those people had lost their focus, and they had forgotten to be about God's business. Jesus turned their tables and their lives upside down, and they ended up in a pile of rubble. Jesus came in and pointed his finger to show the people the way back to God. After the chaos of that dramatic event in the temple comes a new way of **resurrection** and **new life**. This morning, wherever you are on your spiritual journey, in crisis and chaos or in joy and jubilation, come back to the basics and find your way to a new life.