Lent 3 B

March 4, 2018 Susan L. Davidson

All Saints', Wolcott

There's a lot of talk today about winning and losing. Some of it has to do with winning or losing battles in the current war with Afghanistan. On this particular day, however, there is certain to be a generous segment of Americans who are perhaps just as concerned with winning and losing the coveted Oscars. And there are always those out there who dream of winning the lottery. Today, we are concerned with winning the battle over sin and death, the primary work of God in Jesus Christ. The engine for that work is love. Today we make in our Lenten journey a giant turn from the Gospel of Mark into the Gospel of John. We will stay with John now throughout Lent and throughout the Easter season, before returning to the Gospel of Mark. In today’s appointed reading, we hear an account of an event usually described as “the cleansing of the Temple.” Jesus, trying to recover the original purpose of the Temple – the worship of God – and the roots of that worship, the Covenant made with Moses centuries before, to love God above all else, and the neighbor as one’s self.

There's nothing in John's story to reveal the build-up of Jesus' anger that culminates in the cleansing of the Temple, and the driving out of the "money changers." Probably John figured that his audience would hear and understand. It's important for us to understand the scene in the context of John's Gospel. In the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), this confrontation is associated with the Passion of Jesus, right before his Crucifixion. John, however, places it about three years earlier - right at the *beginning* of Jesus' public ministry and after his first miracle at the wedding at Cana. The key to John's placement of the episode here is in verse 22 (the last verse of today 's Lectionary passage): "After he was raised from the dead... .'' Those who have studied the Gospel of John will tell you that John looks at everything through the lens of the Resurrection. It's not that the other Gospel writers don't, but that the others tend to heavily tip the balance of the dual, divine-human nature of Jesus toward the human; in John, the scales are weighted far more on the side of the divine, the ultimate mystery of the Word of God made Flesh in Jesus, the Christ.

As John narrates the story, this event of the cleansing of the Temple is intimately connected with baptism - the Baptism of Jesus, and of his followers, as well. And so, this story is *our* story, too. It's all tied up with who Jesus is, as Son of God, and who *we* are, as children of God, and how we live out the life that becomes ours in Baptism, when the Spirit of God sends us out, as Jesus was once sent out, into the wilderness of our lives, to wrestle with all those temptations which lurk in the darkness there. This story is an important part of our Lenten journey to Easter and our own renewal of the Baptismal Covenant – and the celebration of the Baptisms scheduled for Eastertide.

That's what this Baptismal Covenant of ours is all about: it's about acknowledging that we *will* be wrestling with evil, and receiving the promise that God will be with us to help us prevail. "Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you sin (notice it's not *if* ever, but *whenever* you sin), repent and return to the Lord?" The answer in the Prayer Book is not simply, "I will," but "I will with God's help." The same with the promises about regular church attendance, and about proclaiming the Good News, and loving our neighbor, and striving for justice and peace, and respecting the dignity of *every* human being. "I will, with God's help."

The Good News is that, in Baptism, we become one with Christ. You know how, in some kinds of cloth, the pattern is stamped on, and eventually fades away? But in other cloth, the pattern is woven right in? That's kind of what Baptism is like for us. The cross of Christ becomes woven right into our being. It becomes inseparable from us. Because of it, we are united with Christ, and Christ with us, in his own struggle against evil of all kinds, in his death, and, finally and above all, in his resurrection, through which God has overcome all evil with good. It is this Good News which gives us hope and comfort in times of war, amidst the threat of tragedies and terrors we can hardly begin to name, and in the day-to­ day temptations to choose the easy and self-serving way, instead of one which will serve the common good.

This Baptismal Covenant of ours hearkens back to the Covenant God made with the Israelites who wandered in the wilderness of Sinai. God reminded the people what wonders had been done for them, and then gave them a gift - the Law: Ten Words to make of them one nation under God, to help bring some order into their lives and to enable them to live together in justice and peace. It is, in fact, that same Law which gives order to our lives even today, and which continues to sanctify our relationships with God and one another. The same Law is at the foundation of the Baptismal Covenant. In another Gospel account, Jesus tries to make it even clearer: "Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself," he says. "On these two Commandments hang *all* the Law and the Prophets!"

The trouble was - and is - that the whole *system* had gone awry. The system had turned the ten "words" which were the original Law into over six hundred detailed rules. The transactions in the Jerusalem Temple were perfectly "legal.' According to the rules, cattle, sheep, and doves which were ritualsistically clean were required for the burnt offerings in the Temple at Passover. But, since Passover was a *pilgrimage* feast, many of those who came from far away would not be able to carry such offerings with them. Hence, animals were available for sale in the outer court of the Temple. Now, you may recall from another biblical story that Greek and Roman coinage bore the image of the occupying Roman emperor, Caesar. Such coinage could not be acceptable in the Jewish Temple, and therefore had to be changed into the acceptable shekel. Sounds reasonable, doesn't it?

The problem was that this "legal" arrangement exploited the poor because the money-changers added on an extra amount on to pad their own pockets. It was an example of what we might today call "structural injustice." So when Jesus attacked the practice in the Temple, he was actually attacking a Temple system which promoted worship without compassion, works without mercy, religion without substance, ritual without justice.

When the Temple leaders demanded to know by what authority Jesus acted as he did, he replied cryptically, "Destroy *this* temple, and in three days I will raise it up." As usual, they didn't understand. Since for Judaism, the Temple is the place where God dwells on earth, Jesus was saying that his own body is now the place where God dwells. And here *we* are, the Body of Christ in the world today. God is in the midst of us. In what ways might God work through us to restore the Law of Love in our time?

What injustices do you see around you? Poverty? The grossly unequal spread of wealth? Homelessnes?s Exploitation of the poor? Discrimination? Racism - or any of the "isms"? Do we accept them as unavoidable, or actively work against them?

When we meet God in worship here on Sunday, how does that experience transform our lives for the rest of the week? Do *we* see through the lens of resurrection? Are you ever at war within yourself, as Saint Paul was, wanting to do what is good, yet falling easily into that which leads to sin? Alas, most all of us fall into his good company!

Might this Lent be a good time to examine those questions, to repent where necessary and take whatever actions might be called for, so that Easter will truly be a resurrection from the dead and new life for each of us, *as well as* for the world in which God has given us to live?

Because in Easter, God and everybody wins.