HOMILY FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

March 7th, 2021

St. Andrew's Church-Winthrop & Zoomsville

From the last verse of the psalm which we heard earlier:

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

And from the Gospel which we just heard:

And his disciples remembered that it was written, 'The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up.'

"Zeal" is dangerous. A little maybe isn't so bad. But more than a little creates problems.

Zealousness by its very definition knows no limits. It consumes us with emotions. We can cannibalize ourselves and lose our balance, our very identity. Calling someone a zealot isn't a real compliment. It means being emotionally swept away, going overboard or, as the disciples recollected with verse 9 of Psalm 69, being "eaten up."

Our Lectionary didn't assign Psalm 69 for today. Instead we got Psalm 19. It's so much more pleasant and Anglican. The psalm begins with a survey of the wonders of creation. It goes on to paint a lovely picture of a bridegroom racing through the day. And then it talks about the perfections of God's law. Verse 13 even says:

Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression.

My mother liked to refer to "presumptuous sins." Yet she was something of a zealot - for peace, racial justice, and socioeconomic equity. Mom could experience moments of overpowering outrage and righteous anger. My father, my sister, my brothers and I, like the disciples, would watch as zeal washed over her and took control. We would wait for it to subside and things to get back to normal.

What were Jesus' disciples thinking when they saw him rage around the forecourt of the Temple? Why did Psalm 69 pop into their heads? Let me read some verses from it so you can appreciate how alarmed and frightened they were:

Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul.

I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me.

I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God.

O God, thou knowest my foolishness... shame hath covered my face.

I am become a stranger unto my brethren, and an alien unto my mother's children.

For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up.

We may prefer to think of Jesus's attack on the moneychangers and the vendors of sacrificial birds and beasts who sat in front of the Temple as a glorious manifestation of his power and righteousness. But clearly the disciples didn't see it that way - given that it was Psalm 69 which came into their minds.

Were they just faint of heart, scaredy-cats, weak sisters? Put yourselves in their shoes. By what he did at the Temple, Jesus effectively shut down the religious center of Judaism – if only briefly. No worship could proceed without the exchange of Roman coins for temple currency and the purchase of sacrificial animals. Pilgrims and other worshippers, moneychangers, vendors, priests and acolytes were all inconvenienced.

But notice that Jesus wasn't arrested. His was a violent but symbolic act, sort of like peace protestors chaining themselves to pillars of the Pentagon or pouring blood on draft files. As soon as Jesus left, coinage could be collected, birds and beasts could be rounded up, tables could be put back into place, and the usual commerce and worship could resume. And the authorities could bide their time because everything was back to normal.

Except for perceptions of what had just happened. And what it meant. Jesus was probably seen by the powers-that-were as something of a troublemaker long before this. After all, he was John the Baptist's cousin and John's head had been cut off a couple of years earlier. Now, having seen Jesus boiling over with anger, taking a whip in his hand and throwing tables around, he became a marked man.

Watching in shock, the disciples could not help but know that the situation suddenly had become dangerous. For Jesus. For them. Here's one more verse from Psalm 69, verse 6:

Let not them that wait on thee, O Lord God of hosts, be ashamed for my sake: let not those that seek thee be confounded for my sake, O God of Israel.

From the disciples' point of view, who waited on the Lord God in the Temple? That had to be the priests. Who sought the Lord God in the Temple? That had to be the pilgrims from far away and the other worshippers who exchanged Roman coins for Temple currency, and bought birds and beasts to be sacrificed at the altar. What a meany Jesus was! How embarrassing! What did Jesus's actions accomplish? Why, why, why?

Let's return to the word "zeal". Those of you who get my emails with metroplex weather forecasts know I love word origins and the layers of meaning in words. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says "zeal" didn't exist until 1382 when John Wycliffe defied the Pope and translated the Bible. In Psalm 69 and throughout the Old Testament, Wycliff found the Hebrew *qin'a*. The New Testament had the Greek *zelos*. The Vulgate Bible used by the Roman Catholic Church had the Latin *zelus*.

Wycliffe couldn't find any existing word in English that conveyed the right meaning. So he created "zeal" from the Greek *zelos* and the Latin *zelus*. (*Qin'a* was obviously no good, being too close to quinoa – just joking!) The root of all three words – *qin'a*, *zelos* and *zelus* – means boiling over or burning up. All three of them originally were used to describe jealous rage, overpowering anger or some other kind of uncontrollable passion.

I repeat what I said beginning this homily: Zeal is dangerous. Can there even be just a little bit of jealous rage, just a little bit of overpowering anger, just a little bit of uncontrollable passion? When any or all of these zealous emotions boil over and burn hot, they are destructive. Zeal means that things are out of control. The burning fire will be all consuming.

Our Old Testament reading from Exodus says:

I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God.

We know that zeal and jealousy are closely-related synonyms. Zealousness is jealousness. But a jealousy of what? Of God? For God? Of others? Of their relationships with God? Of their roles in society? Of their wealth and power?

When Jesus become zealous in his Cleansing of the Temple, remember what he said:

Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise.

I think the key here is the phrase "my Father's house." Not our Father's house. And not thy Father. My Father. The possessive pronoun is an important clue to the source of his zeal.

Jesus was fully human. He felt the same emotions that we do. Like frustration, when his mother asked him to help out after the wine ran out at the wedding feast in Cana - which happened just before today's Gospel passage in John. Like impatience, when he cursed the fig tree for not bearing the fruit he wanted to eat - which happened just before today's events at the Temple in the three Synoptic Gospels.

In all four Gospel accounts, Jesus arrived in front of the Temple and didn't like what was going on. They were the exact same things that had been going on there for centuries. But right then and there Jesus couldn't allow them to continue. He told everyone it's "my Father's house" and he chased folks off with some kind of a whip John tells us he quickly fashioned (probably from ropes for use with the sacrificial cattle and sheep).

Now remember that Jesus had been praying and talking to his Father at lot during that last week of his earthly life. They were particularly close right then, even if his Father was asking a lot of him. Jesus had some raw feelings. He acted on them. The barren fig tree, the grubby money exchangers, the poor vendors of birds and beasts all bore the brunt of Jesus's super-charged emotions. Not to mention the banged up tables.

But why would the high priests be particularly afraid or upset? It was a momentary disruption. Commerce and worship resumed. Well, nobody likes someone breaking into their house and smashing it up – do they? And the Temple was their prize possession. Their life's work, their social standing, and the tradition they followed all came from it. Jesus was a rowdy troublemaker from off the street. Good riddance to bad rubbish!

A few years back, our Lenten study group read the day-by-day account called *The Last Week* by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. They describe how Jerusalem at that time was a socio-political tinderbox, ready to burst into flame. Two days before the Temple incident was Palm Sunday when Pontius Pilate rode into the city along with armed cavalry and a legion of centurions while Jesus led a popular counter-demonstration riding on a donkey.

But already in the city there were marauding gangs of Zealots. That's Zealot, with a capital "Z". Remember how the Hebrew word *qin'a* and the Greek word *zelos* have roots that mean boiling over or burning up, like with jealousy? Neither *qin'a* nor *zelos* appear to have been used much until early in Christ's own lifetime. Only then were the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes were joined by a fourth Jewish sect – the Zealots (capital Z).

Judas the Zealot was the founder of the sect in 6 AD; Jesus Christ was roughly six years old. The first Zealot (capital Z) had the given name in Hebrew of *Judah*, means praise. *Qin'a* was added because of his actions; he was literally known as "the boiling-over-with-praise one," "the jealous praising one," or "the passionate praising one." His followers took the same moniker and became known collectively as the *Qan'aim* or *Zelotes.*

Although considered a Jewish sect, the Zealots weren't particularly religious. They were militant ethno-nationalists who wanted to drive out of Israel all foreigners who had settled there: Romans, Greeks, Parthians. They wanted to get rid of whomever, whatever wasn't – to their mind – authentically Jewish. Zealots conducted attacks, carried out assassinations, burned buildings. They also targeted collaborating Jews, like the Temple priesthood.

The Zealots are most famous for their role in the disastrous Jewish-Roman war of 66-73 AD. When they managed to seize control of Jerusalem, the Zealots deposed the High Priest, killed some of his acolytes and instituted what the historian Josephus of Alexandria labeled a "reign of terror." After a fanatical last stand inside the Temple, it was utterly destroyed by a Roman army commanded by the emperor Vespasian's son and successor, Titus.

In the Talmud, another name for the Zealots is the *Biryonim*. It means "boorish ones", "ruffians" or "wild things". Their zeal expressed itself not just in planned attacks, assassinations and house burnings, but in spasmodic abuse of anyone and everyone who crossed their path and in explosive bits of unpredictable mayhem. To most eyes, like taking up a whip, chasing off vendors of birds and beasts, and overturning tables.

It was in an atmosphere fraught with anxiety and fear that Jesus staged his protest in the forecourt of the Temple. Notably, it was known as "The Court of the Gentiles" because that was as far as non-Jews and the ritually impure were allowed. You can bet that the priests and religious police saw Jesus's actions as those of a Zealot. And remember, one of his twelve disciple was Simon the Zealot (capital Z). So Zealots were among Jesus's followers. You're known by the company you keep, right?

A side note about Simon the Zealot: Like several of the other, minor disciples, we don't know a lot about him. Various traditions maintain he became a missionary – to Armenia, to Ethiopia, even to Britain. (The market town of Calstor in Lincolnshire even claims he's buried there, near the Parish Church of St. Peter & St. Paul.) But some of the oldest sources tell a sadder story: Simon the Zealot died fighting the Romans inside the Temple in 70 AD.

Back to the point I hope to make. It was one thing for Jesus to enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in a mock-triumphal march. That was a funny send-up of military and religious processions by the Roman occupiers and their Jewish collaborators. It was quite another thing for him to go berserk at the Temple – one day after Palm Sunday according to the Synoptic Gospels – and to display his zeal and appear to be a Zealot.

Later in the Gospel of John, Chapter 11, starting with verse 47 we read:

Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we?... If we let him thus alone, all *men* will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation. And one of them, *named* Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them... it is expedient for us that one man should die for

the people, and that the whole nation perish not… Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death.

Now we know that while he displayed zeal, Jesus was no Zealot (capital Z). But he was actually even more threatening to a priestly establishment that insisted it controlled all access to God. Amma Susan commented on a draft of this sermon and I've come around to her way of thinking. The priests and police could label Jesus a Zealot to help get rid of him. But quite likely they feared he was something more, something much worse (for them).

Jesus wasn't arrested for what he <u>did</u> in the Temple. He was arrested later and then executed for what he <u>said,</u> and how he personified an existential threat to the hierarchy.

Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.

When Caesar crossed the Rubicon to seize power in Rome, he famously announced *jacta alea est*, "the dice are cast." The cleansing of the Temple was Jesus's Rubicon. His protest there caused the religious authorities to see him as threatening their hierarchical position and undermining their leadership status. Being collaborators with the Romans, they had Pilate and his troops to defend them against what real Zealots might do. But against what Jesus said?

So they decided to kill him.

Paul in today's letter to the Corinthians gives insight into how Jesus's public actions during his last week in Jerusalem – appearing by turns as a performance artist, a prophet and a rabble-rouser – turned all usual calculations of military and political power upside down. It's the reverse of "sticks and stones may break my bones

but words will never hurt me." The Jewish authorities weren't scared by Jesus's staged protests. They trembled at the message he was sending to everyone around him:

For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.

With Zealots rising up against Roman occupation, destruction of the Temple the inevitable result and the end of a system in which the very few interposed themselves between God and the very many, Jesus was showing everyone a new way to salvation. He didn't mind looking foolish or weak in the process: Riding on a donkey! Causing an uproar at the Temple! Outraging the priests! Provoking the police!

By maintaining that his Father's house needed no special currency, no sacrifices of live animals – and by inference, no high priests and no monstrously big Temple with forecourts, inner sanctuaries and treasuries – Jesus ordained that those who exploited the existing religious system would kill him. Even if they suspected that he was right. Which was why they had to silence him, one way or the other.

Labeling Jesus a Zealot leader was one way. Pontius Pilate asks Jesus a four days after his protest at the Temple: "Are you King of the Jews?" Significantly, the phrase "King of the Jews" in the New Testament is only ever used by Gentiles – specifically the Magi, Pilate, and Roman soldiers at the crucifixion. Jews use the geographic term "King of Israel" or lineal term "David's son." "King of the Jews" is an ethno-nationalist title. And Zealots wanted a purified, solely Jewish country.

Jesus doesn't answer Pilate, of course. He doesn't explain that his zeal was to save all nations. It would take too long. Pilate, himself a proud Roman citizen and ruler, probably couldn't comprehend it. It would just get in the way of the mission. Because Jesus also knew from God his Father that his dying on the Cross wouldn't mean that his zealousness was a lost cause. Far from it.

As Paul told us:

The foolishness of God is wiser than men;
and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

It looked to the disciples like what Jesus did and said in the forecourt of the Temple on the Monday of Holy Week was foolishness. It looked to Roman soldiers and Zealots like Jesus did and said at Pilate's tribunal on Good Friday was weak.

They were all wrong.

Alleluia!