

Deut 8:3: “He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that] one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

On Ash Wednesday, we are called “to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s Holy Word.”

It is around this Word, both the written word and the Word incarnate, that we have gathered here this morning.

Our lessons offer us a rich diet of Scripture from which to choose.

As Father Dan Martin, the rector of St. Anne’s, Warsaw,

pointed out to me earlier this week,

the readings from the Hebrew Bible during Lent this year are following the theme of the covenant,

from God’s universal covenant with Noah in Genesis 9,

through the giving of the Law on Sinai, which we heard today,

to Jeremiah’s New Covenant.

This morning, however, let us turn our eyes to the Gospel of John,

to meditate for a moment on the life and words of our Lord,

to draw out what questions the Scripture asks of us,

as we prepare to receive Christ’s body and blood.

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

How well this little verse, which begins today’s Gospel reading, contains our entire Lenten meditation.

Each of these forty days we may with increasing honesty say:

The Passover is near.

Each day we draw nearer to Holy Week,

nearer to Good Friday,

nearer to those moments of cosmic darkness

between the hours of noon and three.

But, we may also be tempted to console ourselves:

Good Friday is near, but it not yet upon us.

It is still a several weeks away.

We have at least that long to process Lent, to pull ourselves together, to figure out what this strange season of self-denial means.

And indeed, if we were reading Matthew, Mark, or Luke this morning, we would be right.

For in the first three Gospels, during his adult ministry

Jesus goes up to Jerusalem only once.

The words *Jesus went up to Jerusalem* are words that recall his passion; they recall his willing offering of himself,

his willingness to take up his own cross,

like Isaac who carried the wood of his own sacrifice to Mount Moriah.

When we hear the words *Jesus went up to Jerusalem*

we ought to get down on our knees

and bow down our hearts.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus goes up to Jerusalem for the Passover only once, sitting lowly upon a colt.

In John, however, Passover occurs not once but three times.

The phrase, *The Passover of the Jews was near*,

becomes a kind of refrain or *leitmotif* throughout John's Gospel;

far from being a one-time reference, Passover permeates the story,

wiping the blood of Christ's passion over the lintel and doorpost of the entire drama.

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus goes up to Jerusalem for the Passover not at the end of his ministry, but at the very beginning.

With Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we may want to cry out:

“Not yet, Jesus. We are not ready for you to go up to Jerusalem.

Stay in Galilee a little longer,

heal the sick,

sail on the sea,
climb the mount and pray in silence,
preach a while.
But do not go up to Jerusalem.
Your hour has not come.”

Nonetheless, *Jesus went up to Jerusalem.*
In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves,
and the money changers seated at their tables.

Well that’s a relief.

Despite the ominous beginning of this story,
John’s next words give us a little breathing room:

Jesus has not, it seems, gone up to die;
in Herod’s temple, it’s “business as usual.”
Maybe this isn’t about the passion after all.

We were just getting ahead of ourselves.

The farmers market is still open; the ATMs are working.

And all Jerusalem is bustling with one of the most important festivals in the Jewish year:
Passover, a commemoration of Exodus and spring.

To us it may seem untimely that Jesus goes up to Jerusalem
all the way from Galilee for this Passover,
but to the Jewish reader, there is a quite logical explanation.

According to the *Torah*, there were three pilgrimage festivals
when Jews were required to appear in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to God.

As it says in Exodus 23:17:

Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God.

These festivals were Passover in the first month,

Pentecost in the third month,

and *Sukkōt*, or the festival of Booths, in the Seventh month.

Regarding Passover, Deuteronomy 16 says:

You are not permitted to offer the Passover sacrifice within any of your towns that the LORD your God is giving you. But at the place that the LORD your God chooses as a dwelling for his name, only there shall you offer the Passover sacrifice.

The primary importance of the pilgrimage festivals was for all Jews to offer sacrifice in the temple. But in the Judaism of Jesus' day, these pilgrimages seem to have had an additional importance: pilgrims came to see the dwelling place of God. For much of their lives they lived far away from the temple, far from the daily ritual of prayers and sacrifices. To many, the temple must have seemed a far off, symbolic place, perhaps something like Washington, D.C. Only three times a year, they were commanded to stop their work and come to the place where God dwelt, to have an audience with him.

For ancient Jews, God's presence in the temple was palpable. God's Holy Name not only resided in the Holy of Holies; his holiness actually radiated out into the temple adornments and the building itself. Holiness was communicable, and the earthly "stuff" of the temple was not immune from "catching" this divine character.

This aspect of the pilgrimage festivals, the hope of seeing God in his dwelling, can be found on a closer examination of Exodus 23:17. In the standard translation, the verse says that the Jews are required to *appear before the LORD*. But many scholars have argued that the Hebrew more likely reads *not to appear before the Lord God*,

but to see the face of the Lord God.

In Jesus' day, then, pilgrims to the temple sought nothing less than a glimpse of God.

God is, of course, not visible;
to see him directly meant death,
and Moses, famously, only saw the back of God,
who passed by him while he was hiding in the rock.

Certainly, for most ordinary folk, direct vision of God, was out of the question.
However, God's presence could be mediated to the pilgrims through the temple,
most importantly, through the Ark of the Covenant.

In the Samaritan Bible, Exodus 23:17 says that pilgrims come
not to see the face of the Lord God,
but to see the ark of the LORD.

This alternative reading involves a clever play in Hebrew
on the words for "ark" 'arōn and "lord" 'adōn, which are only one letter apart.
It is possible, moreover, that the Ark, on these pilgrimage festivals,
was actually brought forth from the Holy of Holies for people to see.

That Jesus in fact shares this high view of God's presence in the temple
is revealed by his actions in the Gospel.

Upon entering the court of the Gentiles, where the sellers were, he plaited a whip of cords,
turns over tables, spills coins, drives out oxen, sheep, and doves
and renders his verdict:

Take these things out of here! Stop making my father's house a market place!

Here, Scripture gives us cause to step back and ask ourselves
In what spirit have we undertaken our Lenten pilgrimages thus far?
Have we merely offered the required sacrifices,
Doing our duty to the season,
Appearing before God and our fellow pilgrims
with our offering of ox or sheep or dove?

Have we made Lent a commodity to be consumed?
Or have we sought what is greater,
not passively *to appear* before him,
but actively sought *to see* where He dwells?

But where shall we see God?

As we return to our story, Jesus utters the words
which stand at the heart of this passage,
and reveal his answer to this question.

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."

With these words, Jesus overturns far more than tables.

Rather, he prophesies two events.

On the one hand, he prophesies the destruction of the temple,
which in the year 70 fell to the Roman general Titus,
soon to be the emperor, Titus Caesar.

But Jesus also says: *Destroy this Temple*, that is, destroy the temple of my body,
and in three days I will raise it up.

Who can easily grasp the full meaning of this passage?

On the one hand, it reveals the depths of Jesus' humility.

Jesus, the marginal Jew from Nazareth, the biggest backwater in the Roman Empire,
goes to Jerusalem for Passover.

He who is sinless

travels the length of Palestine to make offerings for sin;

the very God who parted the waters of the Red Sea

offers a thanksgiving with Israel for its liberation;

and perhaps most ironically of all,

Jesus obeys the command to appear before God's dwelling place on earth.

And yet, paradoxically, Jesus claims to be that very dwelling place.

His flesh and blood shall be and are already
the new temple of the living God.

Like the temple in Jerusalem,
Jesus' body is not devoid of divinity;
his divine person fills all his humanity,
in such a way that the two can no longer be unraveled.

So we read in the prologue of John's Gospel:

*And the Word became flesh and made his tabernacle among us,
and we have seen his glory.*

Where shall we see God's dwelling place?

It is in Jesus. He is the Temple.

It is upon him, upon his flesh and blood,
that we look, when we seek the face of God.

But where is he now?

Where has my Lord gone?

When I look around the nave, and even in the sanctuary,

I see nothing but sackcloth and ashes.

All the crucifixes, even the one we carry in procession,
are shrouded with the veil of mourning.

I see no joy, only sorrow;

I see no kingly glory, only a crown of thorns.

Destroy this temple. Jesus' words speak directly to us.

Destroy this temple. So even now, by our sin, we have.

Destroy this temple. I, Lord, even I.

In Lent, we cover the images of Christ within the church,
to remind ourselves that when Jesus went up to Jerusalem, he died,

and the holy temple of God was reduced to ruins.
Ours were the hands that destroyed that dwelling place,
Ours were the eyes that had so place to see him.
John's Gospel confronts us with this truth,
not only on Good Friday,
but even now, in the middle of Lent,
when we are not yet ready to comprehend what it means.
Before the time was ripe,
before his hour had come,
Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
The words of the prophet Malachi, ring somberly in our ears:
the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

Let him not find us unprepared;
rather through fasting and prayer,
through the giving of alms and the reading of scripture,
let us return to him.
Let us remember his passion and follow his humility.
For the Lord is patient and slow to anger;
his temple is here, his very flesh and blood, in the sacrament of the altar.
O Come, let us worship and bow down. *Amen.*