

March 7, 2021 – online service -- Lent 2, Lunar New Year

Exodus 20:1-17

John 2:13-16

For everyone born (on ppt)

I will speak out for those who have no voices (StF 702)

Show me how to stand for justice (StF 713)

=== ORDER OF SERVICE===

Call to worship

For everyone born (on ppt)

Intro to readings

Exodus 20:1-6 (in Cantonese) – Henry Chung
(vs 1-17 in English)?

John 2:13-16 (in Cantonese) – Joyce Tsang

Lunar New Year Dragon myth – Rev Paul Lau

Meditation – angry!

I will speak out for those who have no voices (StF 702)

Intercessions – Richard Vincent

Show me how to stand for justice (StF 713)

Blessing

May the God of Love and Justice
Keep equipping us to beat our drums
And hit our gongs
And overturn the tables of injustice
So that all God's children may live
In peace and safety
In justice and joy. Amen!

Opening Prayer

Lord God of Justice and Joy,
You call us, especially during Lent,
To follow you into places and situations

That we know so well

And consider again

Whether you are being honoured

In the words we say

In the things we do

In the habits we practice

In the comforts we enjoy

In what we protect

And in what we ignore.

We're reminded that you got angry

With the very normal status quo around you

That was harming God's children.

We're reminded that you showed your anger,

And that's OK.

Be with us, Lord, as we journey with you this Lent.

Amen.

For everyone born

For everyone born, a place at the table,
for everyone born, clean water and bread,
a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing,
for everyone born, a star overhead,

And God will delight
when we are creators of justice and joy
yes, God will delight when we are creators of justice,
justice and joy!

For woman and man, a place at the table,
revising the roles, deciding the share,
with wisdom and grace, dividing the power,
for woman and man, a system that's fair,

And God will delight
when we are creators of justice and joy
yes, God will delight when we are creators of justice,
justice and joy!

For young and for old, a place at the table,
a voice to be heard, a part in the song,
the hands of a child in hands that are wrinkled,
for young and for old, the right to belong,

And God will delight
when we are creators of justice and joy
yes, God will delight when we are creators of justice,
justice and joy!

For everyone born, a place at the table,
to live without fear, and simply to be,
to work, to speak out, to witness and worship,
for everyone born, the right to be free,

And God will delight
when we are creators of justice and joy
yes, God will delight when we are creators of justice,
justice and joy!

■ *Shirley Erena Murray*

Exodus 20:1-17 (The Ten Commandments)

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the LORD your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;
you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol,
whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above,
or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them;
for I the LORD your God am a jealous God,
punishing children for the iniquity of parents,
to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me,
but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation
of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God,
for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.
For six days you shall labour and do all your work.
But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God;
you shall not do any work— you, your son or your daughter,
your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.
For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them,
but rested the seventh day;
therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honour your father and your mother,
so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour's house;
you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey,
or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

John 2:13-22

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

In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves,
and the money-changers seated at their tables.

Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle.

He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables.

He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here!

Stop making my Father's house a market-place!'

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I have a friend, loosely connected with the church, who is angry.
There is a grave injustice going on around her –
It is a personal matter which has potentially disastrous – even lethal – consequences
For her, for her son, for their livelihood and well-being.
It could be described as domestic abuse, but it actually goes much deeper than that.
It is also a situation embroiled deep within systematic and institutional abuse
With racism and classism and sexism.
She has repeatedly called out for help – and been ignored or sidelined –
By persons who feel they're just trying to work within the way society is...
They often ignore her pleas for help, because it just doesn't fit with their expectations.
Unconsciously, they make her feel like she is causing all the problem
Rather than recognizing that she is being abused.
Though I know my friend's name, and God knows her name,
I am not naming her today, because you know someone like her, too,
And if I only give my friend's name to this situation,
You might be tempted to ignore your friend's situation.

All around the world today, there are people who are suffering,
Some living close to us – perhaps even in our own family –
Some living far away, and yet their situations are known to us – and to God.
On a late evening not so long ago, I was just finishing the last of several zoom meetings,
When I had three people send me urgent messages
About desperate situations they were involved in.
I was very tired, and I knew I could not address all their situations,
But I could listen and let them know someone cared...
And I could help them think and pray through how we might get more help.

I could hear anger in each of them.
I was angry, too.
I wanted them to know that anger is not inherently evil:
Anger is often the fuel that energises us
So that we are spurred on to address the situation.
Today's reading reminds us that even Jesus, rather than being 'meek and mild',
Got spectacularly angry at least once in his life –
And all the gospel writers tell us about that!
God is angry with us.

In John's Gospel, the story of Jesus getting angry comes early
And it seems to be setting the tone for what is to come in Jesus' ministry:
Jesus is confronted with a situation that makes him angry,
Angry enough to make it into a public spectacle –
One that eventually serves to publicly justify his death –
But one which also speaks to God's sense of justice
And asks us all: for what cause are you willing to give your life?

We've all heard the story, and we know a bit of the background:
How Jesus is angry because folks are turning the Temple into a marketplace
Rather than a place of worship.
But Jesus' anger is not just about status quo: it's about abuse.
Abuse is an exploitation of power for evil purposes.

Some forms of abuse become so commonplace that we ignore them.
Sometimes we forget that each of us *has* power –
And if we forget or neglect to use it for good, we too are guilty of abuse.

The good religious folk who ran the temple
Felt they were doing God's will by allowing money-changing
and the selling of animals for sacrifice in the Temple.
All that business had to do with keeping the proper part of the Temple 'holy' –
Unstained, unblemished for the worship of God –
That meant that money which was given as an offering had to be untainted...
And that meant that the normal Roman coins of everyday life could not be used,
Because they had effigies of the Roman rulers stamped on them,
So they needed to be exchanged for Tyrolean coins.
(And the fact that Tyrolean coins contained more silver
Surely couldn't have escaped the Temple Treasurers' attention)
And animals to be sacrificed had to be unblemished,
And so perfect specimens needed to be available for purchase,
Especially from those pilgrim worshippers who had come from afar
And couldn't be expected to bring their animals with them on the journey...
And the best place to do all these holy transactions was in the Court of the Gentiles –
Which was already less than 'holy', just by being for the Gentiles...
And made perfect sense to those running the Temple...

But that way of thinking also said to the Gentiles who wanted to worship in God's Temple:
'what you've got is not good enough for God'
Even who you are – a Gentile – is 'not good enough'.
It also meant that the place which was originally meant as a place of *worship* for Gentiles
Was now a hotbed of commerce,
With live animals squawking and bleating,
Occasionally getting loose and running amok,
And the butchery close at hand...
Not exactly where one would want to go for prayer and contemplation!
As I've said, it all probably made perfect sense to the Temple authorities –
But Jesus saw it differently.
And Jesus was angry because God's purposes were being ignored, stomped upon.

Jesus would have known about these abuses all his life –
Perhaps he grew up with it regarding it as a usual part of life
But gradually growing aware that it wasn't right –
Perhaps his realization was a bit like ours when we suddenly – or gradually –
realise that racism or classism or sexism or unbridled consumerism
Is embedded in the social fabric we've grown up with ...
That just by going along with the way we've learned to live our life
Is actually harming others.
When we make those realisations, we have to figure out how to respond.
Sometimes we just set it aside – too difficult to deal with.
Sometimes we recognise that the evil we've discovered
Is actually serving us some benefits –
We realise if we try to change the system, we're going to suffer as well...
Stay quiet and let it work itself out... or let someone else do the protesting.

But ultimately, the actions and words and thoughts which harm others also harm ourselves

Earlier in the service we heard the 10 Commandments

which are all about how we are to treat God and each other with respect and honour.

Jesus got angry in the Temple

because neither God nor the Gentiles were being treated with respect.

And he used his anger in actions to call attention to the situation.

We heard earlier in the service about the Lunar New Year –

Celebrated across Asia from Mainland China to Hong Kong

To Thailand and Singapore and Myanmar and Malaysia...

Each ethnic group has its own particular version of the celebrations,

But most all of them have retained the story of the monster who comes to destroy –

And the great and noisy beating of drums, and hitting gongs to scare it away

As the old year passes and the new comes into view...

At the New Year, the tradition is also to wear red -- the colour of courage and hope

I'm wearing a red bead necklace today,

given by Bishop Kapluanga of Myanmar when he stayed with me two years ago...

Is it any coincidence that the people of Myanmar were banging their traditional drums

A few weeks ago in protest against government atrocities?

The Lunar New Year also comes when the moon is at its first stage,

When only a tiny line of light is visible,

When the night sky is at its very darkest.

The Lunar New Year reminds us that Hope is yet to come:

We strike out against evil while the darkness is still around us.

When Jesus struck out when the darkness was all around.

He didn't just strike out in self-serving anger,

But he put his own life in jeopardy by publicly acting out

On behalf of those who were being rejected and abused.

Jesus was not a Gentile – he didn't need to cause a fuss on their behalf.

I can imagine his ministry might have gone more smoothly if he hadn't caused a ruckus.

But he did because that's what his ministry was about:

Speaking/acting against abuse of power, including all in God's love.

Perhaps it was his speaking out that caused his crucifixion –

You can get in great trouble for speaking out – you could even get killed.

But we also remember – some two thousand years later –

What Jesus did – and what he asks us to continue to do –

The beating of the drums in Myanmar and other places across the world

Have not been enough to stop the violence.

But perhaps not enough of us have been beating whatever drums we have.

When I read the story today of Jesus' anger,

It spurs me on to get angry as well,

angry enough to speak and act for those who have no voices,

who are being abused, who are 'crushed and broken in spirit.'

I've been posting the reports I receive regularly on Facebook –

Most of the reactions have been 'sad face' –

I wonder: what will it take for us to get to anger?