

Lent 3 B, March 15, 2009

Exodus 20: 1-17; 1 Cor. 1: 18-25; Jn 2: 13-22

In his contemporary translation of the Bible, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson, tells it like this—Jesus put together a whip out of strips of leather and chased them out of the Temple, stampeding the sheep and cattle, upending the tables of the loan sharks, spilling coins left and right. He told the dove merchants “Get your things out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a shopping mall!” That’s when his disciples remembered the Scripture, “Zeal for your house consumes me.”

Zeal. It’s a word that makes us uneasy. Zeal means ardor, fervor, passion, diligent devotion. It’s a hot and fiery word. To be consumed with zeal suggests heat, energy, force, intensity. It suggests a person who is on fire.

A woman consumed with zeal devotes her life to the cause or the work that means everything to her. She is on fire—and in her devotion she may create an artistic masterpiece or make a scientific breakthrough that blesses humanity. A man consumed with zeal gives his being, his utmost, his life, to the cause or the work that means everything to him. He is on fire—and he may be a catalyst for change in the world.

Last Sunday a man consumed with zeal spoke fellowship hall. Romeo Ramirez is a farmworker from Immokalee, Florida, and he was in town with about 120 of his fellow workers to challenge Gov. Crist to eradicate agricultural slavery. Romeo told us about picking tomatoes under the burning sun, and about getting paid 40 cents for each 30 pound bucket of tomatoes, a rate that hasn’t changed since 1978. He spoke with articulate passion about the abuses perpetrated by agribusiness in this state. Romeo is a man on fire.

Still, even though we admire the passion and devotion of such people, zeal makes us uneasy. Zeal can eat up a person’s life, burn a person up. Zeal takes us into a danger zone. It’s like the temperature gauge on your car. The needle moves off center, all the way over to HOT.

A person consumed with zeal might be a reformer like Martin Luther, who was on fire for God’s gift of grace. Or, think of a prophet like Martin Luther King, Jr., a man on fire for God’s justice. Their fiery zeal illuminated the world—but they also got burned. As serious challengers of the status quo, they drew the fire power of serious enemies.

Think, too, of a woman like Paula Loyd, an American who worked in Afghanistan as a researcher on contract with the Pentagon. Her mission was to get to know the villagers of rural Afghanistan, and try to untangle the web of tribal, political, and ethnic relations that govern their lives. Such understanding helps in the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda insurgents who have regained power in that country.

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I speak of Paula Loyd in the past tense because last November an Afghan man she was talking with in the marketplace doused her with gasoline and set her on fire. She died of her burns in January.

Friends and colleagues from Loyd's time in Afghanistan described her as a woman of extraordinary energy, empathy and personal force, who worked around the clock and battled blizzards and bureaucracy to bring help to others. "She had a passion for the people of Afghanistan," an Army major said of Loyd. "She died doing the work of bringing peace to a people she loved and respected."¹ Zeal consumed Paul Loyd, and the zeal of her enemies burned up her life.

Islamist militants are people on fire—the kind of fire that kills. But I think we are aware that Christianity, too, has its share of zealots who do great harm in the name of Jesus. In today's world we associate religious zeal with extremism, fanaticism, and burning ruins.

So we have an uneasy relationship with zeal, especially the religious kind. Zeal is like fire--dangerous when it gets out of hand. Zeal *consumes*—zeal can kill--and we're afraid of that.

How, then, do we respond to the Jesus who encounters us in today's gospel reading? What do we make of this Jesus who wreaks havoc in the Temple on one of the most significant feasts of the year, so that no sacrifices or tithes could be offered? This Jesus overturns the furniture, drives people and animals out of the holy place and yells, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"? This isn't gentle Jesus, meek and mild. This Jesus is consumed with zeal. This Jesus is furious, on fire.

What is he so hot about?

I wish we had enough time to unpack this part of John's gospel. We'd talk about sacrifice at the Temple, and why the people had to exchange their Greek or Roman coins for coins without a graven image. We'd learn about the pilgrimage feast of Passover, when Jews like Jesus came from great distances to worship at the Temple. We'd discover that Jesus isn't cleansing the Temple but shaking its foundations.

Jesus, an outsider to the power structure of the Temple, assumes the authority to challenge that power. He challenges a religious system that equates an institution—the Temple—with the presence of God. He shakes up a religious system so

¹ Washington Post, Feb. 18, 2009.

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embedded in its own rules and practices that it is no longer open to a fresh revelation from God.

Jesus is consumed with zeal. Why? Because Jesus himself *is* the fresh revelation from God. And what is that revelation? Jesus reveals *God's* zeal. Jesus burns with the heat, the ardor, the fervor, the passion, the diligent devotion of our God. Jesus shows us the heart of God on fire with love for the world.

And what about us? Here we are in another religious institution, St. Stephen Lutheran Church. We have our rules, our practices, our traditions. But what are *hot* about?

If we are lukewarm in our faith, if the flame is barely flickering, maybe it's because we are afraid of where passion for God might take us. And it is true that passion means suffering and sacrifice. Jesus' death on the cross is called the Passion of the Christ. But as baptized people, we have already been ignited by the Holy Spirit. The purpose of our worship here is to fan the flames so that we can take Christ's heat and light to a cold and shadowy world.

There is an old story about a saint named Abbot Joseph, one of the spiritual masters of the 4th century who were known as the desert fathers. Abbot Joseph was in charge of a large community of monks living in the desert, and his main job was to instruct the young monks who came to him for spiritual guidance. One day one of those monks came to see him, clearly forlorn. He had followed all the rules, done everything right, but still he felt there was something missing. "Father," he said to Abbot Joseph, "according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation, and contemplative silence; and according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts. Now what more should I do?" Abbot Joseph rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of flame. He said, "Why not be totally changed into fire?"²

Ardor, fervor, passion.

Heat, force, intensity.

Burn in us, Lord. Burn bright. Amen.

² Retold by BBT, "Changed into Fire," in *Gospel Medicine*, 1995, 132.