

March 4th, 2018, Third Sunday of Lent, Year B
The Rev. Rob Fisher
St. Dunstan's, Carmel Valley

Readings: Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Cor. 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.*

We hear about Jesus turning over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple in today's gospel reading, and we may think it's about money, but money is not what this scene is really about.

It's about the structures that religion sometimes builds around God.

As a theology professor I had once said, beware if you think you've *got* God. Because you've really got something less than God, because God cannot be put into a box.

The precursor to the first temple was a tent. It was a massive tent used by the Israelites during their forty years traveling in the wilderness as they made their way toward the promised land.

God's presence was believed to dwell in the most central room, the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. The Ark, of course, contained the original stone tablets given to Moses, recording the ten commandments written "by the finger of God."

Solomon built the first temple in Jerusalem, but that was destroyed by the Babylonians. The Ark was probably lost at that time.

Years later, Herod the Great built what was known as the "second temple," and it was one of the wonders of the world. It was absolutely massive, and during Jesus' day it was still under construction. Herod was both part of the Jewish religious system, and also an agent of the Roman Empire. He was also mentally unstable, and the temple was as much a tribute to his ego and power as anything else.

Although it was one of the greatest structures ever built in history, it was

completely destroyed by the Romans after a Jewish revolt a few decades after Jesus. It had already been destroyed by the time the words of the Gospel of John were written down. Only some of the massive stones of its foundation remained, as they do to this day, known as the Wailing Wall.

During Jesus' day the center of temple worship involved priests who were the ones designated to go near the holiness of God. It was a terrifying thing. Their role was also to take the sacrifices on behalf of the people and offer them to God on the altar.

The Passover was the most special time of the year for the Jews, and more than 100,000 people would arrive in Jerusalem, which was a city of only about 30,000! The people traveled to Jerusalem so they could make their offerings at the temple. You can only imagine the crowds.

People arriving at the temple would first change their money, from the regular Roman coins, which were not acceptable, to special temple currency. They would then work their way toward the inner parts of the temple to buy their animals and such, and to give them to the priests for their sacrifices.

One senses that participating in this whole system of temple worship did not bring people closer to God. It probably felt like being part of a large religious machine, and one that was all about barriers, gatekeepers, and transactions—and not about transformation.

I had an experience last weekend that approached holiness, but in a very different way.

As you probably know, the hills above Montecito and Carpinteria, where I grew up, lost all their vegetation in the recent fires. On January 9th, there was heavy rainfall that caused the hillsides to come lose. It created a flashflood situation with mud flowing down through neighborhoods in Montecito, carrying rocks the size of Volkswagens, trees, cars, and anything else you could imagine. 23 people died, most of whom were discovered miles from where the mudflow literally dragged them out of their beds. Cars were washed into the ocean. Hundreds of houses were damaged or destroyed.

I have helped to start up a new organization here that brings together people from the three Abrahamic faiths—Jews, Christians and Muslims. We have found one thing all three of our faith traditions really share is a passion for serving others, so most of our events involve doing just that. We had a leadership meeting a few weeks ago, and I suggested we take a group of people down to Montecito to help dig homes out of the mud! The other leaders were excited about the idea, so last weekend five of us (two Christians, two Muslims, and a Jew) drove down. We arrived on Saturday night, spent the night in people's homes, and then worked all day Sunday.

We volunteered with a great organization that has sprung up in the wake of this disaster called the Santa Barbara Bucket Brigade.

There is so much to say, but I'm going to try to keep this succinct.

I can tell you that after the experience, my body was very sore, but my heart was very full—with elation and sorrow, gratitude and grief.

Life and death had come together in that very place, among those ruined buildings, and we volunteers had found ourselves surprised to be standing on muddy, holy ground.

The Bucket Brigade has had hundreds of volunteers every weekend. Everybody seemed really “up”! People were friendly, and I heard stories of the work people had done on previous weekends.

Our group was assigned to dig out two houses in one of the badly hit neighborhoods. One house was slightly uphill and across the street from the other. Incredibly, the garage from the uphill house was ripped off of the house, and it slammed into the bedroom of the other home. The couple who were in the bedroom had got up and were standing when the wall burst open and all the mud flowed in! They were engulfed in mud up to their necks and pulled into another part of the house. This all happened at around 4am, so the sun wasn't up yet. They were injured, barefoot, and very cold. But they were alive. They had to wait in that side room for three hours before being rescued.

When we first attempted to clear out their bedroom, it was absolutely full of debris, including garage items, parts of trees, building materials, and of course mud. We used a small tractor to pull large items out, and shovels to

get the rest. When we first saw it, the only recognizable item was the bed, which still had white sheets on it. It was above all the mud and debris, so high it was almost touching the ceiling.

In the uphill house lived a woman and her two young kids. When the mud came into their home, she had her kids hop on her bed with her and the three of them held onto each other as the mud carried them all out of the house. The mattress got lodged on the roof of the downhill house! They were able to climb down from the roof and join their neighbors inside the house to wait to be rescued.

The mom herself was right beside us, with a mask on, and a shovel in her hand. She thanked us all for being there to help, and let me tell you what a humbling thing that was. It was the least we could do.

As I shoveled out the side room and the walk-in closet of the downhill house, I kept wondering what it was like for the couple.

And here is a surprise. I happen to know two households whose houses were in the path of the debris flow. One of them, I know, had a garage hit their house. I started to wonder, could this be my friends' house?

It was!

A little later in the day, they showed up, and we saw each other for the first time since I moved away from Santa Barbara eight years ago.

Could this have been an accident?

As I have been processing this whole experience, I realize how close this space was to the threshold between life and death.

And I am also left with the beauty and light of the volunteers.

They were not there to get a gold star.

They were there because they had to be. And this was holy.

I wondered—if my home were suddenly filled with mud and boulders and trees and parts of someone else's house, would strangers arrive and help me

to dig it out? I would hope that everybody could expect this, but you never know until it happens. If it does happen, it will be a picture of the Kingdom of God. This is the Gospel incarnate. It is simple, and it is powerful.

It is transformative.

Back to the priests in the temple, to be a priest back in the old days was not a great thing. It was dangerous. They had to be kept apart from regular people. They had to be kept clean and pure. And their job was about going right up to the dangerous holiness that was by all accounts terrifying.

We have a new concept of priesthood now, called the “priesthood of all believers.”

It recognizes that holiness is not stored away in a temple. Holiness is actually all around us. It is often hidden, but the gift of priesthood in all of us is for us to uncover and recognize the holiness that is in our midst. We are all called to step toward the borderlands, where the holy meets the world.

Bill Countryman develops this thought beautifully in his book *Living on the Border of the Holy*, in which he says that all of us are called to be priests, but in different ways. Some as artists. Some as teachers. Some as friends. Some as helpers and neighbors.

We don’t need a complex religious system to tell us this. We don’t need moneychangers, or professional priests, or special buildings.

We can know the entire power of the good news of Jesus—and the awe-inspiring beauty of holiness—with an act as simple as picking up a shovel.

—*Amen.*