

Nothing

Exodus 20:1-17, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22

I invite you to imagine with me... It's a cold night... you wear many layers of jackets, sweaters, snow pants, gloves, boots, hats... all trying to keep out the chill, but nothing is doing the trick... in the distance, you see a faint glow... as you walk closer, the snow crunches under your feet and the cold wind rises even stronger... drawing close you see others, huddled tightly around a large campfire... the fire rises against the night, even beginning to melt the snow around it... you draw right up alongside the fire, and the skin around your face, all that is exposed to the air, begins to feel the warmth... you quickly begin to take off your gloves, and extend your hands to the warmth... those around the fire slide out of the way to let you draw nearer... you open your coat and begin to feel the warmth against your body and the chill that has gripped you is broken. You bask, almost in reverent submission, before the warmth of the fire, heart and layers open to its life-giving power. You smile at those around the fire with you, a community sustained against the heart of bitter night by the life of this defiant fire. NOTHING separates you from this community of fire.

Community drawn together by warmth that defies the bitter cold of isolation. Now, let's continue to imagine, what would it be like if you had stayed at a distance? Would you have received the warmth of the fire from that far away? Would you have come to know the community gathered? What about if you had left all the layers on when you got to the fireside? Those layers that had done their best to block out the worst of the cold, would in turn do their part to block out the warmth as well. You'd have felt some of the warmth, but not all. And what would have happened if someone else had come forward and stood between you and the life-giving flame, blocking you from its radiating heat? Would you have stayed obstructed, or moved to a new place of warmth?

These questions reveal the things that separate us from the flame and its life-giving light and warmth. Whether it is distance, or layers, or others... things get in the way. Some days our faith can feel like this... Needing the gift of this fire's warmth with NOTHING in the way... and yet everything between us.

I was studying this Sunday's texts with fellow pastors when one of my colleagues lamented the nature of the Lectionary this week. He said, "I know that [this Lectionary cycle is] trying to fit in all of the [Hebrew Bible] Covenants in Lent, but these lessons all have NOTHING in common!" I looked up and smiled and said, "It's funny you should say that, because in my reading of these lessons, NOTHING is exactly what they have in common! And that's the whole point!"

Now my colleague was correct, in a thematic, narrative, biblical sense, there is very little that connects these three texts: Moses receiving the 10 Commandments in Exodus, Paul describing the message of the cross as foolishness and the power of God in 1st Corinthians, and Jesus chasing the money changers and merchants out of the temple with a whip. But there is a simple theme that emerges across these lessons. And it is threefold:

NOTHING comes before GOD

NOTHING comes between US and GOD

NOTHING comes between US

So let's give them a closer look. What is the point of the 10 Commandments? In Martin Luther's words of explanation to each commandment found in the Small Catechism he begins by saying, "We are to fear and love God". These commandments are a covenant between the people and their God, and also between the people and one another. The person who lives by these commandments is living within the covenant of Community. They are living as God's people, and they are living as a people of God.

We see this in what can be called the cruciform setting of the Commandments. The first three: No other Gods, Do not take the Name of the Lord in Vain, and remember the Sabbath, are all a means of being in relationship with God. They create the vertical dimension of our lives as a people in relationship with God. Commandments 4-10: Honor father and mother, No Murder, No Adultery, No Stealing, No False witness, No coveting house, no coveting spouse and stuff, are all about our horizontal dimension, our relationship with one another. Together they create the cross, the juxtaposition of our lives as a people in relationship with God and neighbor. The POINT of all of this, is that NOTHING comes before GOD. NOTHING comes between us and God. And NOTHING is to come between US as community.

Let's get out of order and consider our Gospel lesson. Jesus arrives at the temple and sees that the Temple in Jerusalem has been overrun by corruption and greed. There are money changers and merchants polluting his father's house and disrupting worship in this place. Greed, Pride, Arrogance, and Corruption. All these things now lie between the people and God. So Jesus fashions a whip.

It's worth noting that when people ask "What Would Jesus Do?" as the famous fad bracelet once asked, remember that flipping tables, standing up to corruption, and scattering livestock with a whip is a perfectly acceptable answer. In what could seem to be a fit of rage that takes over the prince of peace, we see instead a means of cleansing and purifying the temple. This is where God's people have come to offer sacrifice and praise to God. This is where God's people have come to worship, but they can't get anywhere near the warmth of this fire for all the greed and corruption with which they've wrapped themselves.

Can you imagine all the petty squabbles, haggling, deal making and frustration that would pollute this place of worship? Can you imagine if before you came into the door of your house of worship, all your US Dollars had to be converted to Bishop Bob Bucks—only valid in the Virginia Synod, ELCA—before you could worship and give offerings? And if that was the practice you can bet you wouldn't be getting the fairest deal, but what does that matter when you've travelled a great distance with your family to worship for this holy festival... You'll suffer the injustice if you can just worship, but now that you're in the doors you're so bitter and angry that you don't have a heart for worship anymore, you have a heart of anger for those who swindled you at the doors, and sold you this overpriced cow for the offering....

Jesus casts them out, cleanses the temple, and prepares the way that NOTHING comes before GOD. NOTHING comes between US and GOD. NOTHING comes between US.

And Paul shares with us the message of the cross. Indeed it is foolishness. As we are perishing to sin, it is foolishness that God would love us enough die on the Cross. It's foolishness that God would pour out love across the generations on the cross as a means to everlasting life. Grace is foolishness to perishing sinners like us, and yet we sing its song of glory. We know that we are saved through its power, we know that while we were still sinners we were justified through Christ's love and made Saints. The cross is foolishness, the cross is the Power of God. God's foolishness is greater than our own human strength.

The warmth of the fire is greater than the power of our coat and many layers. It seems foolishness to take off gloves and open up our layers in the bitter cold of darkened night, but even in this foolishness we are opening ourselves up to the life-giving power of this fire that can dispel deep night and cold. We are living in reverent submission to its warmth as a community of fire.

Sin certainly exists as a heavy coat in our lives. It wraps us, surrounds us, is with us as we wander in the cold. It is foolishness to put it aside, but through Grace, our sin has been reconciled and we are called to lay it down and step boldly into the ever-burning firelight of grace. Put it aside and feel the foolish fire. It is freedom and it is life. And so we put on the foolishness of the cross. We take off our layers of piety, and our gloves of righteous works, that we might feel the warmth of grace upon our hearts. Those things may have made us feel good while we were still wandering cold, but we cannot manufacture our own fire. We cannot manufacture our own Grace. The Cross is a sign that even death is conquered by the love of God. NOTHING comes before GOD. NOTHING comes between US and GOD. NOTHING comes between US.

God has done this work of freeing us from our own need to manufacture salvation or form artificial community. Through the warmth of God's fire we are set free by grace and gathered together as one community, rooted in covenant and promise. Throughout the season of Lent, throughout this ever-lengthening and bitter cold season of COVID-19 isolation, as we wander through this frightful wilderness, it is important to hear this lesson. So many of us feel like we're wandering, cold and alone, piling on distractions and worries and fears and egos and pride to weather this seemingly year-long Lenten wilderness, trying to save ourselves through more stuff. But friends... the fire is already lit, the invitation is already open, and we are not alone in this wilderness. And we hear in once again, something that may sound like a challenge **TO** us, but is truly a promise **FOR** us...

NOTHING will ever come before GOD.

NOTHING can ever come between US and GOD.

NOTHING should ever come between US.

Amen.