

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today we hear how Jesus went up to Jerusalem for the Passover. It wasn't His first time. Luke tells us that the Holy Family "*went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover;*" and Luke tells us especially of the time when Jesus was a twelve-year-old boy (Luke 2:41-42). But this was the first time since Jesus began His ministry.

By this pilgrimage, Jesus fulfilled the other part of the prophet Malachi's prophecy. Malachi prophesied John the Baptist's preparatory ministry: "*Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.*" And then he prophesied, "*the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming*" (Mal. 3:1). Jesus began His ministry; He went up to Jerusalem; and He came "*suddenly*" to the temple.

The temple was significant to the Jews. The temple (and the tabernacle before it) is where the Lord promised to come, to the Holy of Holies where the Ark was placed. The Lord instructed Moses: "*you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel*" (Exodus 25:21-22).

The temple was also where the sacrifices were made. That makes sense. After all, for sinners to stand in the presence of a holy God requires atonement, and most sacrifices included an element of atonement. Temple sacrifice was a bloody affair. That makes sense, too, for "*without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins*" (Heb. 9:22). Thus, just outside of the Holy Place in the courtyard of the priests was the great altar for the burnt offerings. There the priests would slaughter the animals, gather the blood, splash it against the altar, and pour it out around its base. "*And the priest [would] burn [the sacrifice] on the altar, as a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD*" (Lev. 1:9).

Entrepreneurial Jews made a business out of serving the pilgrims. They set up tables to exchange money for the temple tax — you see, it had to be a shekel, not Roman or Greek coinage. And they sold animals for the sacrifices.

And so, it was in part to this marketplace mindset that Jesus objected. His Father's house was not intended for this commerce. Thus, He fashioned a whip and drove out the animals and the vendors and scattered the coins of the money-changers.

Now Jews saw Jesus do this, and this time, they merely asked for His credentials for doing such a thing. But Jesus would enter the temple again two

years later and do a similar thing. That time, they would seek “*a way to destroy him, for they feared him*” (Mark 11:18).

But was there something more going on here with Jesus than just being upset with the Jews for doing business in the temple? After all, it’s not clear that any of the commandments were being broken. In fact, the customers had come to the temple to remember “*the LORD [their] God, who [had] brought [them] out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*” They were there for the Passover, after all. Nothing in the text suggests that the sellers were cheating their customers, stealing from them. To be sure, tax collectors — like Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2-10) — were often guilty of collecting more than what was required; that’s largely why they were so despised. But there is not hint of that in the text. Some early Church fathers saw the selling of animals as metaphors for later abuses within Christianity, but that answer seems a bit too speculative to me.

So why the temple tumult? I submit, the zeal Jesus displayed was more than just a “critique of the mercantile activity in the Temple area and of profiteering from religious requirements” (Note 105, Weinrich, *Concordia Commentary: John 1:1–John 7:1*, p. 345), and the answer to the puzzle — we might even call it a mystery — comes from Jesus Himself. It’s found in Jesus’ answer to the Jews. They asked Him, “*What sign do you show us for doing these things?*” And Jesus answered them, “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*” And the Evangelist explains, “*he was speaking about the temple of his body.*” Jesus was talking about His body offered up unto death, and His body raised back up from death. He was talking about bearing our reproaches, our iniquities, our transgressions, and making atonement for them.

For Jesus came suddenly to the temple, fulfilling Zechariah’s prophecy concerning Himself: “*there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day*” (Zech. 14:21). He came driving out these vendors because the time of the precursor sacrifices had come to an end. Those sacrifices were but types of the one to come, after all, it’s “*impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins*” (Heb. 10:4). Those priests had to offer those sacrifices every day, but they didn’t really take away sins; they couldn’t — not they themselves (Heb. 10:11). They atoned only insofar as they pointed ahead to the “*single sacrifice for sins*” that Christ would offer (Heb. 10:12), the “*once for all*” sacrifice by Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:10) — the one whom John the Baptist called “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29), the one Paul called our “*Passover Lamb*” (1 Cor. 5:7), the one Peter called “*a lamb without blemish or spot*” (1 Pet. 1:19). “*He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world*” (1 John 2:2).

Oh, the folly of this message until the Holy Spirit takes hold of you and convinces you how God's power is hidden in weakness, how God's wisdom is hidden in foolishness, in Christ and in His sacrifice on a cross, as St. Paul said: *"God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are."*

His power is hidden in us, too, in our humility and contrition and repentance, as Jesus said to Paul: *"my power is made perfect in weakness"* (2 Cor. 12:9) — in humble faith we receive His grace. His wisdom, too, is hidden in foolishness, for it seems a foolish statement for us to say with Paul: *"when I am weak, then I am strong"* (2 Cor. 12:10). But it's not foolish ... it's not even human wisdom. It's divine wisdom taught by the Holy Spirit. The Lord is our strength, the stronghold of our lives.

All this is why, I pray, you are here today: because that temple of old was destroyed, cast down, not *"one stone upon another"* (Mark 13:2). Old Testament sacrifices are over, ended truly with Jesus' *"once for all"* sacrifice, but in practice with the destruction of the temple edifice. But God's presence hasn't left us. The Evangelist John explains it to us. Jesus *"was speaking about the temple of his body."* And that body is where we are gathered, two or three in Jesus' name (Matt. 18:20), we who by Baptism have been united to Him and who are being *"built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,"* we, who are growing *into a holy temple in the Lord"* (Eph. 2:20–21). Here is where we meet Jesus and eat and drink the fruits of His atoning sacrifice. Here is where we acknowledge:

"1. Jesus comes today with healing, Knocking at my door, appealing, Off'ring pardon, grace, and peace. He Himself makes preparation, And I hear His invitation: 'Come and taste the blessed feast.'

"3. Under bread and wine, though lowly, I receive the Savior holy, Blood and body, giv'n for me, Very Lamb of God from heaven, Who to bitter death was given, Hung upon the cursèd tree.

"4. God descends with heav'nly power, Gives Himself to me this hour In this ordinary sign. On my tongue His pledge receiving, I accept His grace, believing That I taste His love divine." (LSB620)

God grant us Jesus-like zeal for the Father's house.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.