

# PREACHERS' NOTES SAMPLE

## THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT: MARCH 3

### Liberating Joy

By Justin Kosec

#### *Revised Common Lectionary texts*

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

The Ten Commandments might not immediately elicit unfettered cries of joy. What joy is there in a list of things that you shalt not do? Yet, as you know by now, joy does not emerge from a vacuum. Joy can come from recognizing the difference between your old circumstances and this new day. This is what we find baked into the Ten Commandments from the start.

Exodus 20:1-2 reads: “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.’” Christian denominations do not agree whether the first two verses constitute the first commandment or not. Regardless, these words ground the reception of the Ten Commandments in the Israelites’ history as enslaved people who receive these commandments from the God who liberated them.

Slavery anywhere is joyless, dehumanizing, and bitter. Earlier in Exodus, the conditions of Israel’s enslavement in Egypt are described. Out of suspicion, the Egyptian government had instituted policies meant to “deal shrewdly with” the Israelite people, systemically limiting their flourishing isolating them along ethnic lines (Exodus 1:10). This led to forced labor and displacement to state-sponsored labor camps in cities like Pithom and Rameses (Exodus 1:11). When Israelites continued to multiply, systemic state-sponsored oppression became a feature of the entire society. Soon Egyptians feared Israelites and suborned the nation’s economic production into a system created to impose “ruthless” tasks on the Israelites. Government officials demanded compliance from Hebrew collaborators, enlisting the aid of the Israelites’ own midwives to assist genocidal policies (Exodus 1:15).

Under this system, the Israelites lived in constant fear of judgment. They suffered under the thumb of their taskmasters. When they proved successful at anything, whether they were productive in their labor or prodigious in childbirth, the Egyptians redoubled efforts to create conditions for their failure. It was an environment of absolute oppression, where every rule was created to dehumanize them and authorize their abuse.

With this painful history in mind, consider what God requires of God’s people in the Ten Commandments. They must worship the God who saved them rather than any false god or earthly

power (Exodus 20:2). They must have a weekly rhythm of work that includes rest (Exodus 20:8). They must honor their parents and other relationships, such as those with their neighbors (Exodus 20:12-16). They must respect boundaries of ownership, kinship, and love (Exodus 20:12-17).

What God requires in the Commandments is a society where each person works together to respect the types of boundaries their Egyptian overlords ignored. Observant readers will note that the codes in Exodus 21, beyond the scope of the day's lectionary text, detail a social tolerance for the system of slavery – a continuation of the bitter, joyless, dehumanizing practice the Israelites knew from their own captivity. The law of God does not fully rewrite the social code of the day. But even there, it imposes boundaries on those in authority and requires a pathway to freedom for all who are enslaved.

Remembering their captivity becomes the condition for the Israelites' joy flowing from the Ten Commandments. These boundaries include God's insistence that their new society will prove more just, more life-giving, more fruitful, and more fair for every adult, child, and animal than anything they had known before.

If the Exodus passage shows God's liberatory love and the hope that comes from living within God's generous boundaries, the gospel passage from John 2 shows the joy that comes from breaking oppressive norms, even those that seem godly. Here, Jesus overturns the money changers' tables in the temple and proclaims that if the temple itself were destroyed, he could rebuild it in three days. The text itself clues us in to the meaning behind Jesus' words – the temple is Jesus' body – but the religious leaders miss the dramatic irony. They scoff at Jesus, explaining that the temple has been under construction for forty-six years. How could anyone rebuild it in three days?

I don't want to minimize the cosmic importance of the temple to the people of ancient Israel. The temple was undeniably the locus of religious joy for the Israelite people. It was the place where they could worship their God under their own rules, in their own language, and, at least to some degree, free from the control of the imperial culture that occupied their land. It was also the entire center of their worship life, the location of the beating heart of their faith. There was only one temple, and no other place could approach its significance. Still, leaders who cite a decades-long building project reveal a deep level of institutional inertia. The temple's course has been set for generations. The plan is made, the mission set, and the people are following through. From one perspective, this looks like absolute faithfulness to the mission: carry out the commitments of the previous generations, and do so according the blueprints they have made. From another perspective, following the previous generations' plans also means living with the concessions and accommodations they made. Efforts to undo mistakes or to rethink assumptions will come at an increasing cost.

While none of our modern church buildings remotely approach the singular importance of the ancient temple, we know what it means to find joy in the spaces we call our own. When congregations break ground on new building projects, they do so with great hope for how their new

facilities will center their communities. Worshipers decorate church buildings with great care, often filling them with dedicatory vessels, memorial plaques, fine woodwork and metalwork, lovely ceramics, and beautiful banners. The impulse is faithful: we do these things to share our joy for what God has done among us. We return to these physical spaces to reconnect our current experience to the past joy we have found there.

But we also know how the burden of church buildings, construction projects, and worship spaces can, at times, entirely drain the joy from our communities. Some of our congregations know the extreme costs required to renovate old buildings for accessibility to people of all abilities. Others live with buildings that are too large, whether previous generations built too optimistically to attract a larger crowd or because the crowds that once filled those buildings are gone. Many of us grapple with too much old *stuff* at church – stuff that has lost its meaning to us but that we resist throwing away. It's possible to recognize that all these buildings, things, and traditions used to give our worshiping communities life. We can simultaneously recognize how much they stifle current growth and budding creativity. To rediscover our joy again, we may need to be reminded: joy can live and grow in a place, and it can feel connected to a physical space, but joy is never defined by any one location.

I suspect that Jesus encounters something like this when he confronts the money changers in the temple in John 2. In this moment, Jesus shows us the glee of destroying the customary accommodations that have burdened us with history, stifled our worship, and masked our mission. How the people must thrill to see Jesus overturn greed in God's house! How they must marvel to realize they are not required to meet such expectations to worship God. How many powerful people Jesus must cross when he demands a different road. They may have come to believe their joy is inseparable from the places where they've fostered it, but Jesus wants to unbind their joy from these limited expectations.

How thrillingly dangerous it is to smash what binds us! How quickly could we rebuild for the future, if we only followed the God who can reconstruct and resurrect the dead?

### ***Questions for reflection***

- What are the unique assets and drawbacks of your worshiping community's building or worship space? Are there ways in which it is costly to your mission? What role does nostalgia play?
- How can God's law, like the Ten Commandments, lead you and your worshiping community toward freedom? What "money changers' tables" does God's law overturn?
- Where are people longing for liberating joy in your community?