

Jesus Is Coming to Church

John 2:13-22

March 15, 2009

(THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT)

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you....

Jesus is coming to church today. He has a whip -- not a hymnal or a bible -- but a whip in his hand... Things could get rough on this the third Sunday in Lent. ✕

Somebody else came to church once, you know. It wasn't Jesus. Wasn't even close. ✕ It was a little country church, I don't remember where. But Sunday morning came and they all gathered there. And they greeted each other with handshakes and hugs and hellos and how-are-yous. And they talked about the weather, of course. And they always take a little time to catch up with each other and talk about things like bunions and bankers and basketball, of course, because it IS March, you know.

And then Miss Myrtle starts the prelude. And all the chatter falls away. And they turn their thoughts toward God... *most* Sundays, that is. But one Sunday things were different. They all shook hands and said their hellos. And Miss Myrtle came and took her place at the organ and started to play some sweet old hymn. And all of a sudden

the devil appeared ... right there in the church. Can you imagine such a thing? Walked right up to the front of that little church.

And that was it! Church was over! People went running every which way. Kids climbing out of windows. Mothers running to the nursery, scooping up babies. Grown men jumping over pews. And the preacher, of course, was the first one out. "Leading his flock like a good shepherd should," he told someone later.

And just like that they were gone. The church was empty. Not a soul in sight ... except for an old gentleman farmer who was sitting there in a pew, calm as a cadaver. Looked like he didn't have a care in the world. And the devil standing right there in front of him. Evil incarnate! The enemy of all good and godly people standing not more than four feet away! And the old farmer just sat there all calm and collected.

The devil couldn't believe it! He was confused. He'd never seen anything like it. "Don't you know who I am?" said the devil.

And the old farmer looked up and said, "Yes sir. I do."

"Well aren't you afraid of me?"

And the old man said, "No sir. Can't say that I am."

And the devil was just flabbergasted. "Mister," he said, "don't you know that I can make your life a living ... heck?"

"Don't doubt it for a minute."

And the devil was upset. Fit to be tied. "Why aren't you afraid of me?" he shouted.

And the old gentleman farmer said, "Well sir ... I've been married to your sister for forty-seven years."

I know that woman. I'm sure of it. She used to clean the church down in Beaver.... A big woman she was. And proud of it, mind you. The first time I met her, I was there in the study, which was right beside the choir loft. The study was on one side and the choir room on the other. And the church was built so that you could walk from one room to the other behind the back wall.

And I was there in the study one morning with the door closed. Just sitting working at my desk ... It was my first or second week there, mind you. And there wasn't anyone else in the church. So I had the stereo up kind of loud, listening to Bach on the pipe organ. And the weather was just foul. We had a terrible storm that day. Lightning and thunder. All dark and dreary outside. And I was just sitting there reading, making a few notes or something. And all of a sudden the thunder just roared and the windows rattled with the pipe organ music behind me. And I looked up and right there beside me was the biggest woman I've ever seen. With big broad shoulders and a square jaw. And hair shooting out in every direction. And ... well, it was like a scene from *The Ghost and Mister Chicken* with Don Knotts.

She said, "Are you the new pastor?" And when I found my tongue I said, "Yes ma'am." And she said, "Get up... I need to sweep under your desk." So I stepped out into the sanctuary for a moment. And when she came out I tried to chat with her a bit. "Boy, that's some storm we're having," I said. And she looked me right in the eye and said, "I don't have time to talk. I've got work to do." And I wasn't about to argue with her.... That was the janitor. The church custodian.

Her name was Lois. Miz Lois they called her. And the funny thing is the pastor I followed hadn't said a word about her. And neither had anyone else, for that matter. But there she was ... bigger than life. The giant janitor.

Well, over the next few months I got to know her ... about as well as could be expected, I suppose. She'd come from the choir room, slip up on me there in the study and just scare the daylights out of me every time.

One day she walked in and I was reading the scripture lesson for Sunday morning. She said, "What kind of bible is that?" I knew what was coming. And I wanted to say, "It's the HOLY Bible. Says so right there on the cover. "But she was carrying a dustpan and she knew how to use it. So I said, "It's the Revised Standard Version." She said, "Do you preach out of that bible?" And I said, "Well, I try to." And she just glared at me. "You're leading them all straight to hell," she said... (It kind of spoiled my day.)

And from there it got worse. Some of the women would stop by the church now and then to work in the kitchen or practice hymns on the organ. And they'd find her sitting there in the fellowship hall, reading a magazine and helping herself to whatever she could find in the fridge.

And she told them she wouldn't mop floors, because the doctor said it was bad for her back. And she couldn't run the sweeper, she said, on account of her allergies. And you know, there were always ... I don't know what they're called ... carcasses of dead chewing tobacco out on the parking lot. But none of the men there chewed tobacco.... It was her. I think it was her.

And it got worse, mind you. I didn't tell anyone, but somehow they found out about the notes on the pulpit telling me I was going to ... well, you know what it said. And she even took a big red marker and underlined some things in the pulpit bible.

And that was it! They decided to let her go. But she beat them to it. She walked in one day, looked at me and said, "I can't work in this

church anymore.” And I asked her why. She said, “Cause this isn’t God’s church.” (She was not a member there. She went to a Holiness church down the road.) And that was it. She was gone.

So they hired a new janitor. Two of them, in fact. They came as a package. And the first week those two women came and worked at the pace of hummingbirds. Really. Flitting about here and there. You’d be out of breath just watching them. And when they were finished, the place just sparkled. It looked like a Mop-and-Glow commercial. Neat as a pin -- the brass was polished, the carpet was clean. And you could see through the windows! (Even the ones that were frosted, I think!) And the floor in the mess hall was just spotless ... and shiny!

And those two women even cleaned and dusted the study for me. Gathered up all the pens and pencils and letter openers and things, stuck them in a communion cup and put it there on my desk! And when Sunday morning came, there were no sleepers in the church. The whole congregation was wide awake. Because the pews were polished so well folks were hanging on for dear life, trying their best to stay *in* them and not slide out on the floor.

And I know it sounds silly, but it changed things somehow. There were more smiles on Sundays. And people seemed to be lingering a little longer after the service each week. And somehow I think it lifted our spirits. And the church was refreshed ...

Oh ... **Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow...**

**Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.**

Now there was a big church back east that had a new housekeeper, you know. But he wasn’t on the payroll, mind you. Because they didn’t *hire* him. He volunteered. Just showed up one day and went to

work. And it was just before a big church festival. The biggest one ever. People would come from all over for this thing. And they'd stay for the weekend. And all the "bed and breakfast" places and boarding houses and guest rooms all over the city were just bursting at the seams.

And the big church was ready for them, they thought. People would be in and out all weekend to make their annual offering and to pray and give thanks to the Lord. And they were ready for them. They had tables set up, kind of like booths at a craft show, where all the travelers and tourists could come and buy whatever they needed to do it up right. Gifts for God, worship aides, and offering supplies. Everything they needed to make the festival complete. They even had an exchange booth there, so people could buy church money. Special tokens and coupons to give to the church for the work of the Lord.

And then the Housekeeper came in. And he said, "Get up!" And you know what he did. Jesus was so upset by the clutter he saw there that he just cleaned house. John says he went into the temple, saw what they were doing, and then grabbed some cords and twisted them into a whip! And he went *after* them. Jesus did this! Drove them and their "worship aides" right out of the church – all those pigeons and sheep and cows and things. He just cracked the whip and told people to get out. And he turned over the tables where they were changing their Roman coins for the church-offering coins. And the coins scattered in every direction. "Get up!" he said. "Get these things out of here! Don't turn my Father's house into a mall!" And just like that, they were gone. ✠

Jesus is coming to church today. And in his hand he carries a whip, not a hymnal or a bible, but a whip. Oh, things could get rough on this the third Sunday in Lent. ✠

Well, this story in the gospels is what we call the *Cleansing of the Temple* – when Jesus drove the hawkers and peddlers out of God’s house ... And according to John, he wasn’t just having a bad day, he was sending a message. And not just to the peddlers, mind you, but to *all* of God’s people. And the message was **don’t let these things clutter God’s house. Don’t let your worship be soiled by taking advantage of people.**

Remember what James said about that? He said, **Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.** Real worship [worship that is undefiled] doesn’t bypass the heart. It opens your heart. ✕ The people who sold heifers and pigeons weren’t there to serve others. They were helping themselves. Taking advantage of people who felt they had nothing to offer the Lord. *“Step right over here, folks. I’ve got just what you need. And it’s a bargain. It is!”*

That isn’t worship. It’s clutter. What they were doing there just cluttered things up and got in the way. And when that happens ... worship grows stale. Gets all musty and shabby.

And the sad thing is it still happens. Those same hucksters and hawkers have set up their tables round the house of the Lord. But they don’t sell sheep and heifers these days. They sell promises of success. They peddle prosperity. “Bring your money here, but this book, learn this prayer ... and you won’t be able to count all your blessings. God will shower you with (material) blessings. You can live your best life now.” It’s clutter. No matter how good it makes you feel -- it just gets in the way.

But it doesn’t just happen in churches, does it? If you read on in John 2, Jesus made it pretty clear that we’re temples, too. You are a

temple. You are God's house. God dwells in you. And sometimes our hearts and our lives [my heart and my life] could use a good cleaning. Because they get cluttered sometimes with selfish and uncaring ways. And the windows of our soul get so dingy at times that we can't really see that people around us are lonely, or hurting, or in need of our help. Oh and those windows get so dust and dirty that the light of Christ doesn't shine out for anybody to see. And our attitudes about people – about ourselves, even – make our temples a bit musty and stale.

But we're GOD'S temple, mind you. And God wants nothing more than to dwell in our hearts and live in our lives. So we need a housekeeper, a heartkeeper, a soul sweeper.. And the good news is there's someone here – right here in this place – who will do that for free. All you have to do is open the door and let him into your heart – through prayer... daily prayer. Or maybe by making room for some quiet time with a bible story or a favorite passage, or a book of poems and prayers, or maybe just a listening heart. ✕ Open the door by being a servant – find someone who needs a friend, or a visit, or a little encouragement. And come and worship. And if you need to, or if it helps, come here to the church – to the sanctuary here or to the chapel and light a candle if it helps you – and just be still and pray and be in God's presence. And let Jesus refresh your heart with his deep and abiding love for you.

Ah ... Jesus is coming to church today. And things could get rough. Because he means to clean house.

But the GOOD NEWS is that he is just consumed with passion for God's house. Jesus loves us, but loves the righteousness, truth, and holiness of God even more. And he will purify God's house. And transform our temples into his very Body. He will drive out the idolatry in us. He will cleanse us until we shine like the sun. He will

take our church and our fumbling attempts to praise and worship, and transform them into living witness of God's grace and love.

But let me tell you one more little story just to show you what I mean....

One year, during Advent, a group of women gathered for Bible study each week. And the scriptures for each session were taken from the lectionary. It's like a schedule -- a three-year cycle of scripture readings for every Sunday of the year. And one of the readings for that Sunday was from Malachi -- about cleansing and being made pure. It says:

But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he *is* like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: And he shall sit *as* a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness.

They weren't really sure what that meant. I mean, what does a thing like that say about God? They had always believed in a God who is loving and kind... like the image of God in the 103rd psalm -- the one that says: **The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...**

But Malachi the prophet didn't say anything *like* that, they thought. The scriptures for that Sunday in Advent talked about separating the chaff from the wheat, and cutting away deadwood, and holding people to the fire, for heaven's sake. What does *that* have to do with Jesus? What does that have to do with a God who loves us?

Well, a funny thing happened. One of the women offered to find out what she could about this process of refining silver. So she called a silversmith and made an appointment to visit his shop and watch him

work. She didn't tell him she was doing research for her bible study group. She just told him she was interested in learning about the process.

So the next day she drove out to the silversmith's place. And she watched him work. And this is what he did. He held a piece of silver with something like tongs over the fire and let it heat up. And he said, "When you're refining silver, you have to hold it in the middle of the fire. 'Cause it's hottest there," he said. "So if you want to burn away all the impurities -- all the stuff that isn't pure silver," he said, "that's where you have to put it."

And she thought about that -- about God holding us to the fire. Putting us in the hot spot. And she remembered the verse from Malachi that said, "He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver." And she said, "Do you have to sit there in front of the fire the whole time? Until the silver's purified?"

"Yes. The whole time," he said. "And I don't just have to sit here and hold the silver. I have to keep my eyes on it the whole time it's in the fire," he said. 'Cause if the silver's left even a moment too long in the flames, it will be destroyed."

And the woman was silent. She sat there watching him, holding the silver under his steady gaze. And then she asked one more question. She said, "How do you know when the silver is fully refined?" And he smiled and said, "Oh, that's easy," he said. "I know it's refined when I can see my image in it."

I wonder ... When God looks at you... when God looks at me... when God looks at us together as the church... does he see his image?

**Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow...
Create in me a clean heart, O God,**

and put a new and right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways
and sinners will return to you...

This is the word, which is given for you. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Benen, OblSB

