

The Third Sunday in Lent
March 14-15, 2009
John 2:13-22

“An Overturning”

It was the summer of 1973, and my oldest sister had just gotten her driver’s license. As we all know, getting your driver’s license is a very big deal. Getting that little card that say you can legally drive represents a rite of passage from childhood and adolescence into adulthood, but it can also come with some challenges as we learn that with this freedom also comes great responsibility. Anyway, my dad had this old beat-up Chevy station wagon that sort of passed on to my sister. It was big and bulky, and in those days cars had a lot more metal in them, so it was a heavy vehicle. One evening that summer during a Little League baseball that my brother and I were playing in, my parents received word that both of my sisters were in an auto accident. My oldest sister, the driver, was sixteen and my other sister was thirteen. This was in rural Iowa where there were, and still are, many gravel roads. While we were at the baseball game, my sisters hopped in the car and went out for a spin – literally. On one of those country gravel roads not far from our home, my oldest sister was driving faster than she should have been and lost control of the car. As often happens in those split-second moments, she overcompensated with the steering wheel, the car went down into the ditch and overturned. Miraculously, neither of my sister were seriously injured – a few bruises, but nothing more. In my mind, I can still that overturned Chevy station wagon lying upside-down in the ditch. That is one of those images that sticks with you for life.

On this Third Sunday in Lent, today’s Scripture lessons hold up to us that image of overturning. In the first reading (Exodus 20:1-17), with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm God has overturned his people’s slavery in Egypt. He has set them free and has now brought them into a covenant relationship with him at Mt. Sinai. Having delivered them from slavery, God now spells out how they are to live in response to all that he has done for them. God’s words here are how his people are to live in relationship with him and with one another. This is a “Because/Therefore” understanding, not an “If/Then” arrangement. People sometimes think of the Ten Commandments as an “If/Then” arrangement. *If* I am good enough, *if* I live a good life, *if* I do everything God tells me I should, *then* God will love me. That, my friends, is substituting one form of slavery for another. God’s love and mercy cannot be bought. Over against this “If/Then” arrangement stands “Because/Therefore.” *Because* God has graciously delivered his people from slavery and acted in their behalf, *therefore* they are now to live their lives freely worshiping this gracious God and freely serving one another. These words of God are what we call the Ten Commandments, and they can actually be reduced to just two, as Jesus tells us: **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength... [and] You shall love your neighbor as yourself”** (Mark 12:30-31). God overturned his people’s slavery and fear, transforming that into freedom and new life as they reflect God’s gracious character to the world. And what was true for God’s chosen people then is also true today. We relate to God in that “Because/Therefore” understanding.

In the second Scripture reading (1 Corinthians 1:18-25), Paul the apostle writes about the overturning of the world’s understanding of wisdom. From a worldly perspective, what is wise or good or beneficial in one man’s bloody death upon a cross? That’s not the place where most people would look for wisdom, as Paul writes: **“The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”** The cross remains a stumbling block for many today. Within Islam, you will not find the New Testament message of Jesus’ suffering and death upon the cross in the Quran. It’s not there precisely

because this message of the cross is unacceptable to human wisdom. How could God's prophet be so humiliated that he would be executed upon a cross? Because of this "foolishness," the message of salvation in Jesus' death and resurrection has been substituted with the teaching that man is saved by obedience to laws, rather than God's grace. And how do you know if you have been obedient enough to merit salvation? You don't, and that is the great deception. In contrast to this, **"... we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God"** (1 Corinthians 1:23-24).

Finally, in today's Gospel lesson (John 2:13-22), Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers in the temple as he reclaims his Father's house as a house of prayer instead of a marketplace. This is a powerful image and blasts that other image of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" right out of the water! The temple courtyards had become an international exchange and commodities market with animals penned up and ready for sacrifice, and moneychangers exchanging currency from all over the world for the "holy shekels" to pay temple fees. In righteous anger, Jesus drives them all out, overturning tables, reclaiming the temple for its intended purpose: a house of prayer. If we're looking for God's temple, it's not a bricks and mortar building. God's temple is Jesus himself; where he is, there is God. Jesus' words point us ahead to Easter victory and resurrection. **"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up"** (John 2:19). And that is the most awesome overturning of all: death being swallowed up by life.

Here is hope for us when our lives seem overturned – like my sister's car, lying upside down in the ditch. God our Father, who raised Jesus from the dead, is more than able to turn right-side-up whatever is overturned in our lives. Jesus, who overturned the power of sin, death, and hell, is at work in our lives. We look to him, and like his first disciples, we too, **"... believe[d] the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken"** (John 2:22). May God help us to do this for Jesus' sake. Amen.