

SYSTEM CRASH

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Text: Exodus 20:1-5 and John 2:13-22

SCRIPTURE

Exodus 20:1-5

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. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God!

SERMON

On April 27, 2016, meteorologist Metinka Slater of the CBS affiliate KCCI in Des Moines attempted to give the weather report on the local news broadcast. Thunderstorms were rolling through and there was a chance that some of them could be severe. So she tried to bring up the radar on the screen showing the exact location and where these storms might be heading. But when Metinka clicked to the image she wanted, overlaying the green, yellow and orange blobs around places like Red Oak and Clarinda there was a big notice that read, "Microsoft recommends upgrading to Windows 10. Upgrading to Windows 10 is free for a limited time." And then there were choices, like "Upgrade Now" and "Upgrade Tonight."

Metinka Slater was a victim of something called "nagware." It is not a very nice name, I will admit, but that is actually what it is called. It is a program embedded in certain software that is designed to get you to do something, to nag you into taking some action. Often it is found in free or trial software that you can download off the internet. Those promoting this kind of software let you try it out for 30 days, and then at the end of that time limit, notices keep popping up telling you to register and pay for this software if you wish to continue to use it. Although Microsoft Windows is not free by any means, in 2016 they wanted every computer to have their latest version, so they had these messages suddenly appear. And as Metinka found out, at times it was not all convenient. Maybe some of you remember that annoying Windows 10 nagware.

But many programs have nagware that is intended to be helpful. The most common one is found in most word processing software. If you try to close the program, a little screen will appear that reads something like "Do you want to save your changes to Document 1?" Now, yes, it is a bit of a nag, but I, for one, am glad it is there.

Sometimes with computers I have done something that I really did not want to do. Nagware has saved me from making some terrible blunders.

These days, if you use any kind of computer you probably have it linked to the internet, so there is the constant danger of viruses infecting your operating system. So most of us have some sort of security software. Technically you might call it nagware, but if a warning notice pops up from your anti-virus program, you pay attention and are very glad to follow the instructions to eliminate the threat. Because the very worst kind of popup message is the one labeled "Fatal Error." I mean, that sounds really ominous, doesn't it? Fatal Error!!! Most of the time it is not all that bad, and all you have to do is restart your computer. But sometimes you do find yourself staring at what they call the blue screen of death, everything is completely locked up, and you know you are in big trouble.

Now, as annoying as nagware might be, sometimes it would be nice to have popups appear in the non-digital parts of life. How many problems would be avoided if before you did something stupid, a sign would appear that said "Are you sure you want to proceed with this operation? Click Yes or No." "Are you sure you want to send that self-righteous rant of an email off to your boss? Click Yes or No." "Are you sure you want to buy this item, this house, this car, this latest tech gadget that you know you can't afford? Click Yes or No." "Are you sure you want to quit your job and go work for your father-in-law? Click Yes or No." That could save a lot of grief, couldn't it?

Well, we don't have popup messages, but we have been given some very clear instructions for life that should not be ignored. I don't know if we would want to call them nagware, but we find ourselves getting into trouble when we do not pay attention to them. They have been around for thousands of years, and yet are still relevant in our postmodern, internet connected world. You know what I am referring to, of course. They are found in our text from Exodus, the Ten Commandments.

Since we shifted into the season of Lent, we have looked at the promises, or covenants, God has made with people like Noah, Abraham and Sarah. Two weeks ago, I talked about the promise God made after the flood, not just to Noah, but to the all living things, that God would never again destroy life on this earth by water. Last week, Pastor Beth talked about the promise God made to Abraham and Sarah, that they would be the ancestors of great nations, and all of humanity would be blessed because of them. Now one way of thinking about these covenants is that God is installing some new software, a new operating system, for us to use. The flood was like a reinstallation, shutting everything down and starting over. With Abraham and Sarah, God was again installing a new program where God would be directly involved with a particular family, blessing them so that they could be a blessing to others.

In Exodus, at a place called Mt. Sinai, God is once more making a covenant, only now God is doing with a whole nation rather than an individual like Noah or Abraham and Sarah. This new operating system involves a sense of belonging. The Israelites belong to God. They are God's people, and he is their God. It begins with an explanation of how they all got to this point. God says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

This new operating system is one of freedom and deliverance. It is the direct result of liberation from Pharaoh, breaking free from the rich and powerful rulers of this world who use and abuse whoever they can to insure they stay rich and powerful. God says to the Israelites, you are no longer slaves, you are no longer property, no longer required to work for someone else. I have set you free. I will be your God. I will protect you. I will provide for you. I will give you peace. However, in order to keep this system running properly, here are some things you need to do. You need to focus on me and me alone. You need to have respect for my name. You need to pause and take time to worship. You need to honor family, your parents, your spouse. You need to respect those around you. Here are ten popup messages, to help you to keep the system operational.

In Exodus it all seems pretty clear and straightforward. A new operating system was in place and everything should work nicely and run smoothly, right? Well, down through the years, various viruses creep in, corrupting the system, and that is what brings us to our other text for this morning from the Gospel of John. It is a story of Jesus that seems out of character. The Jesus in this passage appears to lose his temper and become violent. This is not the gentle Jesus, meek and mild that we often refer to. So what is going on here?

Well, our text begins with the statement that it was Passover, the holiday that celebrated the liberation from Egypt, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem, to the temple. Now at that time the temple building itself was a lavishly decorated structure with carved marble pillars and doors inlaid with gold and precious stones. But what was more important was what the temple symbolized. It was the center of Jewish identity, a religious institution to be sure, but also the seat of a political and economic system. This system required hundreds of priests, scribes, assistants, servants, security officers and other officials. So how was all this paid for? That is at the heart of it all; the key to understanding this story.

Every Jewish adult male was required to pay a temple tax once a year. It was something like our per capita payments in the PCUSA. (By the way, per capita for this year is \$37 and if you haven't paid yours yet, we would be most grateful if you would.) But anyway, when you came to Jerusalem to pay this tax the standard Roman coins were not acceptable for the transaction. This was because they had a portrait of Caesar on them. "The Divine Caesar," the inscription read, because many in the empire worshiped him as a god. From the text we just read in Exodus, these coins were regarded as graven images, and could not be used as payment for the temple tax. They had to be exchanged for temple currency. Now, do you think it was an even exchange, an ounce of Roman silver or gold for an ounce of temple silver or gold? Not a chance; it was not even close. The people were required to pay four or five Roman coins for one temple coin of equal weight and value.

That was bad enough, but there was something else that was going on in the outer court of the temple. A big part of their worship involved animal sacrifices. But it was difficult if you lived say 70 miles away in Galilee or 25 miles away in Joppa to bring a live animal with you all the way to Jerusalem. So you were allowed to buy an animal at the temple, one that was certified by temple inspectors to be acceptable for a sacrifice. Now, how do you suppose the cost of one of these certified animals compared to a similar animal back in your hometown marketplace, or even up the street in the Jerusalem markets? As you can imagine, the prices were ridiculous. In our reading from John's Gospel the pigeon sellers are mentioned in particular. Pigeons were the cheapest animals, and all that most of the people could afford. One Biblical scholar I read said that the cost for these certified birds was likely eight times the price you would find in other places. So if you could buy a pigeon for \$10 at the local bird seller, you would have to pay more than \$80 for the same bird up at the temple.

That was what was going on, and as is always the case, the poorest people were hit the hardest. So think about this for just a minute. This was a religious-political-economic system that took advantage of poor people. As a result, a few individuals at the top were able to make themselves incredibly rich and powerful, at the expense of those who were poor and powerless, and forced to simply submit to this corrupt system. In other words, it was Pharaoh and his scheme of enslavement all over again.

So that is why Jesus reacted the way he did on that Passover in Jerusalem. If he was indeed angry it was not without a just cause. His heart went out to those who were trying to do the right thing, trying to serve God in the right way, trying to do what they thought God wanted them to do, and yet in doing so were staggering under the hardship that entailed. Meanwhile those who were supposed to be serving God were filling their pockets. This system that God had downloaded back at Mt. Sinai, when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, this system had become totally corrupt.

So this story is not about Jesus having a little temper tantrum. It is not about Jesus getting ticked off, or being offended at something sacrilegious, and acting out a little bit. No, not at all. Jesus' actions were a fatal error message. Jesus is basically shouting to the powerful rulers, "Your operating system is no longer functional. If you do not stop and take appropriate steps you will do irreparable damage. Your system is about to crash!"

All four gospels have this story, but Matthew, Mark and Luke place it right after Jesus arrives in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. John, however, puts the story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and there is a lot of debate as to why and what John is trying to say. The key is in the reply Jesus made to those who challenged him. He said, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up."

Now John does tell us that Jesus is talking about his death on the cross and his resurrection three days later. But what was the temple in Jerusalem supposed to be? It was meant to be the place where you could be in the presence of God, just as Moses had been in God's presence up on Mt. Sinai. It was the place where you could connect with God. It was meant to demonstrate the glory and majesty of God. Yet in the opening verses of John's Gospel, Jesus is described as the Word of God who "became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory."

By placing this story at the beginning of his gospel John is making a bold statement. He is saying that Jesus is the new temple, the new presence of God, the new connection. To use to computer metaphor that we have been playing with, Jesus did not come to patch the old system, to reboot the old system. Jesus came to install a whole new software altogether. He came to start all over, making everything fresh and new. The old corrupt system has to go. And whatever this corrupt system might try to do to Jesus, in a matter of days he will make everything new.

For thousands of years God has been trying to connect with us, trying to establish a working system where we can link together and be all that God intends for us to be. Again and again, God reaches down into our lives with love, mercy and grace. Again and again, we keep messing things up. We ignore the warnings, don't do what we need to do, until eventually the system crashes. But God doesn't give up on us. God keeps on speaking to us, offering us a way out, showing us a path for us to follow. That is what the choir sang about. Do you remember how the anthem went?

Holy words long preserved for our walk in this world,
They resound with God's own heart, oh, let the ancient words impart.
Words of life, words of hope, give us strength, help us cope
In this world, where e'er we roam ancient words will guide us home.
Ancient words ever true changing me, and changing you.
We have come with open hearts Oh let the ancient words impart.

Ancient words will guide us home. That is what Lent is all about. It is about avoiding a massive system crash. It is about listening to what God has been trying to say to us. We no longer belong to the Pharaohs of this world, and so they have no power over us. We don't have to listen to their words of fear, scarcity and anxiety. We belong to God. God will protect us. God will provide for us. God will give us peace. They may be ancient words, but they are what we need to hear right now. They are what will enable us to face tomorrow. They are what will guide us home. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.