

23 March 2003
Lent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Shock and Awe!”

Text: John 2:13-22 (1 Corinthians 1:22-25; Exodus 20:1-170)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Shock and awe. That’s a phrase we’ve become familiar with these past few days with our country now at war with Iraq. Shock and awe was to be the effect of a military offensive of such force and magnitude and precision that it would historic. And if you’ve seen the pictures on TV the past few days, some of the devastation was indeed awe-inspiring – and we saw only a portion of what has happened throughout the country. . . . Remember to keep this all in your prayers. Pray for our country, our leaders, and our military; pray for those who have lost loved ones, and for those held prisoner; pray for wisdom and guidance for all in positions of responsibility as the war continues; and also remember to pray for our enemies, as Jesus has told us to do.

But I don’t want to preach about the war so much as I want to consider another, earlier display of “shock and awe” – and that is what we heard about in the Holy Gospel, when Jesus cleared out the Temple. For although it was not on the scale and magnitude that we have been seeing on TV, what Jesus did that day in the Temple, whipping and driving and overturning, was no less shocking and awe-inspiring to the people who witnessed it. . . . So what happened? Well, it was the time of the Passover celebration, which meant there was a lot of people in town – in fact, it was the most crowded time of the year. And with so many people in town, from a purely practical point of view, it was also the busiest time of the year. The time when the most animals would be sold, the most money would change hands, the most taxes would be paid. It was kind of what the Christmas shopping season is for retailers today – the time when business is at its peak and you make your profits for the year. . . . But, also from a religious point of view, it was *Passover*, which also meant that it was the *holiest* time of the year. The time to remember God’s deliverance from Egypt. The time to come to the Temple to hear the preaching of the Word, to worship, and to pray. . . . But in coming to the Temple, Jesus does not find the preaching, worship, and prayers, but, the text tells us, literally an emporium. Or, if you like, something like a shopping mall, or a department store. And the Temple, the place that was to remain *separate* from the world and its ways and dedicated to God, had become instead a place where business was being transacted. The religious aspects of

Passover had been subsumed under the practical aspects, and the buying and selling, bartering and weighing, give and take.

Now, it would probably be good to pause here for a moment and consider that last thought, that *God's House had become a place where business is transacted*, because that is something that we still find happening in our world today. And I say that because for many people of all sorts of religious stripes, there is the thought, belief, and practice that our relationship with God is a transaction; an exchange, not of merchandise, but different kind of buying and selling, bartering and weighing, give and take, between us and God.

And so, for example, for those who think like this, religion is seen as a matter of **weighing** our sins versus our good deeds, and as long as our good deeds outweigh our sins, we'll find favor with God.

Others see religion as a **bartering** process, seeing what God will accept from us, what we can do for Him, with things like prayers and good works and service, so that He will not hold our sin against us.

And still others, as Luther found during the time of the Reformation and which still continues today, there is the actual **selling** of God's forgiveness for the right sum of money. And so God is a God we have to do business with.

And lest you look down at others, we do this too. We fall into this trap, whenever we say things like, "*God, if you'll get me out of this, then I'll . . .*" Or whenever we *compare* ourselves to other people . . . or whenever we think God is not being *fair* to us . . . those are all *transactional* ways of dealing with God. Thinking that He should do something for us . . . because I'm not as bad as the next guy; or because I've done this for you; or because . . . And let's face it – that's how we think! That's how we've been raised! That's how this world is! You don't get something for nothing. The business of America is business. And so maybe we're not as crass today as they were in Jesus' day – maybe we're "white collar" to their "blue collar" – but do you see? Many, still today, have turned religion into a business. Many have turned "***God's House into a house of trade.***"

But this simply won't do, because God is not a transactional God. He doesn't make deals with us. He's not in business. And so when Jesus enters the Temple and sees all of this going on, He is highly offended! *Personally* offended! The picture of God being presented at the temple is all wrong! God is a **giving** God, a God of **gifts** and **graciousness**! God is a one-sided God – He gives and we receive. God established the Tabernacle and the Temple so that He could be with His people and **give** them His forgiveness and holiness. God came in the person of Jesus Christ so that He could **give**

His life for His people and redeem us from our slavery and bondage to sin, death, and the devil. And God didn't make a deal in any of that, it was all one-sided, all God's doing. . . . And so when Jesus entered the Temple that day and saw His Father *and Himself* being misrepresented in such a way, He had to change the picture. And not just with a few niceties or suggestions about what was being done and how they might change, but with "shock and awe." By making a whip of cords and driving them all out of the Temple, with their sheep and oxen, and pouring out the coins of the money-changers and overturning their tables. ***"Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade."***

Now, how did things get so bad? How did God get to be so misunderstood, then and today? Well, its from our misunderstanding of another, a previous "shock and awe" demonstration by God, the one that took place at Mt. Sinai. When God gave the 10 Commandments and the instructions for the building of the Tabernacle, it was an shocking and awesome display, with Mt. Sinai covered with smoke and fire for 40 days. . . . But instead of taking the commandments as God intended us to take and understand them, we tend to think of them as 'transactional.' *"OK, we gotta do these. These 10 things. That's not too bad; there's not too many! Do these, and God will be pleased with us and He will accept us and save us."* And with such a view religion is not only reduced to a business transaction between us and God, it is reduced to a system of morality and ethics.

But that's *never* the way God intended these commandments to be viewed! We live under the grace of God and the performance of the commandments does not count for our salvation; **and it never did.** God chose and rescued Israel from slavery and destined them for the Promised Land long before the commandments were given, and we were chosen and rescued from our slavery to sin and destined for eternal life long before we ever had the chance to keep or break the commandments. Because of the grace and mercy of God, because of what He has done, because He took the unilateral initiative for us, the safety of our own necks was never in question! He saved us! And so that means that instead of paying attention to how we have to save ourselves, and what we have to do to transact business this business of eternal life with God, we can simply pay attention to Him, to all that He has done **for us**. And therefore in *response* to God and all that He has done – not to *earn* His favor but in *response* to His grace – we keep His commandments. Not because we have to, but because if they matter to Him who saved us and gave us life, then they matter to us.

Now, that's not always easy to learn and understand, because it goes against the grain of the way things are in our world. And so just like today, in response this action by Jesus there are detractors and protestors. ***"What sign will you show us for doing these***

things.” . . . Now that’s an interesting statement because notice that they didn’t object to *what* He was doing, they didn’t ask Him *why* He was doing all of this! They want to know what authority He had to do it. What gives Him the right to correct them as He was doing, and to change things? Show us a sign of your authority! . . . And so Jesus, in a sense, tells them, “*You think this is shock and awe? No. The real shock and awe is still to come. **Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.***” That’s the sign of His authority, *the resurrection*. And that’s what we’re leading up to in this season of Lent: the real “shock and awe” of all that God would do to save sinners like you and me. That God would come down and allow Himself to be ridiculed and mocked and despised and rejected and crucified is shocking – but that **shock** would be followed by the **awe** of the resurrection, when we see the power of death and the grave finally broken! And we hear the awe-inspiring words of Jesus, “*Your sins, they’re gone. I dealt with them. I died for them. I took them to the grave and left them there. You’re free. You couldn’t do it, so I did it. And this gift of forgiveness I give to you, because I want you to have it. You don’t have to earn it, you can’t. And there’s no negotiation, I already took from you what I wanted from you, and that is your sin. You’re free! Depart and live in peace.*”

And so it is in that freedom that we now live. A gift, not a trade or a transaction. Because God chose you before you were even born. Because He called you by His Gospel and made you His own in Holy Baptism. Because He speaks to you His Word of forgiveness and life. Because He feeds you with His own body and blood, His pledge that He will always be here for you. Because He did this and does this all for you, and therefore you are His. And all He asks is that we remember – “**Do this in remembrance of me.**” And in remembering, believe; and in believing, live and depart in peace. . . . And its interesting to note what people remember. The disciples, we are told, remembered the words of Psalm 69, “**Zeal for your house will consume me.**” And understood the actions of Jesus in that light. The opponents of Jesus remembered His words about the destruction of the Temple, and used those words against Jesus in His trial. We, however, remember these words: “**Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.**” We *remember*, and *believe*, and *live* those words. Because that’s God’s real “shock and awe” – not Mt. Sinai, not the cleansing of the Temple, they were only preludes. But the resurrection! That’s the real “shock and awe!” That’s the awesome power and authority of God, which He used to save us from our enemies, and give us the peace and assurance of freedom and eternal life, no matter what this world and its wars may bring.

This is not a house of trade, it is a house of giving the gifts of God. Receive those gifts, depart in peace, and live in that freedom and forgiveness!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.