

# ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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## THE WAYS OF THE CROSS

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Text of a Sermon preached on the Second Sunday of Lent

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EXODUS 20:1-17 | PSALM 19

I CORINTHIANS 1:18-35 | JOHN 2:13-22

This week our hearts should be cheered by the press reports and images of the Pope's historic visit to Iraq. Earlier today he celebrated a service of interfaith solidarity in the historic Christian square of Mosul, the former capital of the Islamic State. With the bombed out ruins of four Christian churches as a backdrop he testified to the persecution and suffering of the church, called the adherents of all faiths to peaceful co-existence, and prayed for the return of Christians to the area.

Later he would celebrate Mass in a restored church in the city. Since 2003, the ancient and culturally influential Christian communities of the region, both Catholic and Orthodox, have been decimated. Of the 1.5 million Christians, which were the cultural glue of the region for centuries, only 100,000 remain.

A few days ago I stood in a local business for an hour and heard a family story of escape from the Turkish genocide in Armenia that took place at the end of both World Wars. This persecution is being repeated today as Azerbaijan, an Islamic republic of the former Soviet Union, invades historic Armenian lands with the help of drones and cyber attacks during a pandemic and general global apathy.

The Armenia Apostolic Church converted the mountain kingdom to Christ in 301 A.D.; it is older than the Church in Rome. And the man telling me this story descends from one lone survivor of that genocide. I leave the store thinking, he loves Jesus and is sharing his love with me, here today. He does not shy away from the tragedy, the cost of what has happened. As he concludes his story, there is no bitterness, only love. Where does this witness come from? How does the church survive persecution in far away lands and our apathy close to home.

The gospels give us stories of Jesus knowing how hard it will be for his followers to understand who God really is. So it is with Jesus in the Temple. Jesus' foolish project of overturning tables prepares us to see the wisdom and the power of God. As Paul says: "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."

In John's Gospel, Jesus' action in the temple comes early on in Jesus' ministry, during some ill defined time of "preparation for the Passover." In the other gospels, it kicks off his last tumultuous week in Jerusalem before his betrayal and arrest. Mark mentions it specifically as one of the reasons for the Jews to want him dead and to want the Romans to do the job for them, that is, crucify him. John, as always, has a different take on things.

Obviously, the ethical critique of how temple worship had become corrupted remains in John. Jesus' overturning of the tables and interrupting commerce, however, is not meant to suggest that the temple worship could be reformed or saved. Rather, it about what Jesus knows and intends.

One of my teachers put it this way: did Jesus “cleanse” the temple, or “clear” the temple? Did Jesus want a reform of temple practice, or was he trying to show that the whole system needed to go?

By putting this episode in the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and having it follow right after the first sign that Jesus performs of changing water into wine, I have always been persuaded that Jesus is acting more like the prophet Ezekiel than the prophet Amos. He is performing a prophetic parable that helps us see, that enacts, what is going to ultimately happen.

Jesus’ resurrected body is going to replace the temple. The worship of his Incarnate presence, his Body and Blood, is going to replace the temple worship. Amidst the bellowing cattle, chirping birds and squeaking merchants, we must not lose sight of the real revolution.

Islam and Christianity are the great antagonists on the world stage. It should not surprise us that Islam, while believing Jesus is a prophet, also interprets the Quran as denying that Christ died on the Cross. They believe he swooned or fainted, or was wicked away by angels, and, possibly, someone else died in his place. Regardless of the theory, by definition, they cannot believe that God’s Son could die a brutal and shameful death at the hands of infidels. The Cross just doesn’t make sense. It is a stumbling block. It is foolishness.

When God appeared to Moses at the burning bush and told him to go to Egypt and free his people, he told Moses to simply bring them back to the mountain where they were standing to, and I quote, “worship me on this mountain.” And when he did, Moses realized he didn’t have the faintest idea what to do. So he told the people to purify themselves, get ready, and went up the mountain, and the first thing God did was give him Ten Words to live by, the Ten Commandments.

And what have those Commandments always help us see? Love God first. Love your neighbor next. Don’t put anything before God. Don’t make an idol, because you will end up worshiping it. Don’t try to control God, because you will end up wasting your time and perverting your principles, taking his name in vain. These words were a revolution.

But the real revolution was not in forms or customs, but in the heart. God's people would learn after centuries of trial and exile and return that neither the form or the place of worship matters so much. Rather, it is the heart of worship that matters.

A Christian who knows the cross, denies himself, and willingly carries it knows the Cross' power and wisdom. It is the power of love. It is in learning that love believes all things, hopes all things, bears all things, and endures all things.

I also had occasion to send a a message of thanksgiving on Facebook to my friend, Bishop Andudu of the Nuba Mountains in Sudan. His people, for more than 50 years, have survived brutal extermination by Islamic forces of the Sudanese government, by retreating to their mountain fortresses and their invincible faith.

What joy to see pictures of Bishop Andudu had gathered his people again on ancestral low lands. He was finally able to visit his people and gather them for worship after another decade in hiding. Like so may of the crowds gathered around him, I too was in tears.

Following the way of the Cross is never easy, nor is it typically rational or logical. It is always a way that reinterprets our rules, and challenges our disrespect for our ancestors and our neighbors. It will always challenge our customs, what is our intention when we worship, and our habit of worshipping the idols of our own making.

Just a few more examples of the foolishness of the cross and the wisdom of God.

The way of the Cross is as difficult as leaving a church in order to return to Christ's true Body. I've heard some stories like that.

The way of the Cross is as irrational as finding faith in the midst of crushing doubt. I've heard some stories like that.

The ways of the Cross is always as improbable as a community of love being raised up from the ashes of war and hate. We've heard some stories like that today!

These are days of trial, O Lord. Raise up your Body! Amen.