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Put your hand in  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Exodus 20:1-17 and John 2:13-22

Welcome to the third week of Lent. That puts us - give or take - in the middle of Lent. Half-way between Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday. How are you enjoying the journey so far? Have you seen vistas of new opportunities? Has your spiritual life become deeper? Or have you been too distracted to really get into Lent yet? Perhaps you prefer to wait for the final sprint during Holy Week?

[image: waiting for the bus]

Are you waiting for the next bus? Are you waiting for a different bus? Are you waiting for anything at all? Or are you - like me - somewhere along the journey of Lent, and grappling with the fact that I'm not exactly sure where I am.

Mid-journey it's easy to feel a bit lost. Ash Wednesday is a fixed point. Holy Week is a fixed point. But where are we now? If you feel a bit lost like I do, it's ok. That's what the middle of most journeys feels like. Lent reminds me of sailing from one port to another. The beginning and the end points of the journey are known, safe harbours. But in the middle of the journey when you're out in open water, you're not always sure exactly where you are.

And into this middle-of-the-journey, the authors of the lectionary give us two well-known stories. The exodus version of the 10 commandments, and the story of Jesus chasing the merchants out of the temple. Are the lectionary authors as lost on the journey as we are. Or is there some reason why the 10 commandments and the cleansing of the temple might be relevant in the middle of Lent?

[image: you are not lost. you are here]

Well, I can think of a few reasons why these stories might be relevant in the middle of Lent. But today I'm going to suggest that both stories simply highlight the fact that - in the middle of our Lenten journey - we do, in fact, feel lost. Not lost geographically of course. But lost in the sense that we are not seeing in our day to day lives what we might hope to see. Lost in the sense that our expectations are not being

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met. Lost in the sense that reality does not quite match up with our hopes and dreams. Lost in the sense that “fixed” points in our faith, the 10 commandments and the ministry of Jesus, are not as well located as we thought. Because the more we think about these two stories, the more uncomfortable they become. And more to the point, the more uncomfortable we become.

Perhaps you think that's over-stated. Perhaps you're even right.

[image: 10 commandments]

What about the exodus version of the story of the 10 commandments? Does that seem like familiar territory to us? The commandments are familiar. Perhaps they are so familiar that we hear them in a nuanced language. A language that has eased our discomfort with the text. Perhaps we hear the commandments in words that make us believe that we actually follow them. I mean, ... we don't bow to idols, do we? We don't worship strange gods, do we? It's been a long time since I last coveted anybody's donkey. As law-abiding Canadian citizens, isn't it obvious that we follow the 10 commandments? The problem with society is that other people don't follow the commandments? We are just fine, right?

Well, that depends a bit on how we read the text, and how we understand our own reality.

[quote from augustine]

For example, what if St. Augustine was right when he said, “Anything you have more than you need is stolen from the poor.” Does that make all of us guilty of theft?

What if Jesus was right in the sermon on the mount when he said, “you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘you shall not murder or you shall be liable to judgement’ ... But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement.”? What if paying our governments to commit murder makes us murderers ourselves? Does that make all of us guilty of murder?

What if taking the Lord's name in vain doesn't just mean not swearing, but also means not using religion for unholy purposes. Like using religion to create barriers between the people of the world. Separating God's children into “us” and “them”, fostering intolerance like Islamaphobia? What if taking the Lord's name in vain includes

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not speaking up against injustice when we find it? Do those things make us all guilty of taking the Lord's name in vain?

What if keeping the sabbath is not about coming to church once a week. But rather, about creating space and time in our daily lives for our own spiritual nurture, reflection, and care. What if keeping the sabbath means living as if our faith actually matters?

The "Sunday School" version of the 10 commandments can be followed, but the adult version cannot. We might be able to live up to the letter of the commandments, but we cannot live up to the spirit of the commandments. So, reading the 10 commandments today is a reminder that we are lost on our journey. And that life - even our life of faith - is not as simple as we might like. Expectations and reality simply do not coincide. We are lost on our journey.

[image: Jesus the superhero]

And what about the story of Jesus clearing the temple? Don't we all just love that story, where Jesus heroically challenges the religious powers of his day? This story is the closest we get to Jesus as a crime-fighter. Jesus as a role model for Steven Seagal.

Besides, righteous indignation is always in style isn't it?

[image: Jesus clearing the temple]

But wait a minute. During Advent didn't we sing about Jesus as gentle, quiet, well-behaved? You remember, "the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes". Don't we want our saviour to be gentle, loving, and well-behaved? What is with this story about Jesus making a whip and driving both people and animals out of the temple? Is that what we expect from Jesus? Is this what we want? Or in this story are we meeting a Jesus that we may or may not approve of? Meeting a Jesus that is just as human as we are. The next time that someone asks you, "what would Jesus do?", remind them that flipping tables and whipping people is a legitimate option. And let me know what kind of reaction you get.

[image: Jesus is done chewing gum]

Moreover, we might be wondering exactly what Jesus was reacting to. These "money changers" were an important element in the religious functioning of the temple

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system. They allowed foreigners to exchange their money and purchase animals of the right quality to make the required ritual sacrifices. Without the money changers and the sellers, pilgrims could not have made their sacrifices at the temple. Besides, that, the temple in Jerusalem had many different courts. The selling would have been in one of the outer courts, not in the more holy inner spaces. It's not exactly obvious what Jesus was objecting to.

And what exactly do we think of this angry Jesus? If you were in the story, where would you be? Would you be helping Jesus? Would you be on the receiving end of the whip? Would you be watching from the side, not sure what to expect next? Would you already have fled the scene? Would you be one of the disciples, wondering what on earth you had gotten yourself into?

[image: Jesus whipping people]

Whatever side you are on, the story is scandalous. We are not in Kansas any more. We are not comfortable with this story because in it we meet a Jesus we don't expect. The story upsets our image of Jesus as calm, pastoral, peaceful. That perhaps is our big problem with the story. It's not that we cannot relate to it. It's that we relate too well to it. We are the buyers and the sellers. Reading the story today reminds us that we are lost on our journey. We are lost because reality is not conforming to our expectations.

Speaking of unmet expectations, February is now over. I was surprised that nobody in this congregation shared a story with me during Black History Month about their own response to hearing Black History. At the start of February I invited all of us to take advantage of the many offerings around Black History Month, and to reflect on our own feelings as we pay attention to that history. In 2021 this is pretty easy, because all of the TV networks and other media sources curate content for that very purpose. The story I want to share came to me from an unexpected source. My watch.

Because this year, Apple introduced a new program called "Time to Walk" where people are encouraged to go for a walk while being accompanied by a person who has a story to share. And during February, most of those stories came from black people. I heard quite a few of them during February.

[image: Draymond Green]

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I was struck by the story of Draymond Green, a basketball player with the NBA. I share this story along with the confession that I don't understand basketball very well. Feel free to let me know at coffee time if I didn't understand Green's story properly. But the way I heard Green tells his story, in 2015 he - and 2 other players brought a transformation to basketball. Prior to that time, players were selected based on who was the best in a particular position: centre, point guard, etc. Green was not the best at any position. But he was very good in every position. He also had the spatial awareness and game sense to help his teammates be in the right place at the right time. Green was not the best centre, or power forward, or shooting guard. But he excelled in being quite good at all of them. And he was flexible. Instead of saying, "I'm the point guard so I need to be here right now". He reacted to what was happening on the court. He became whatever position he needed to be at the time. He became whatever position he needed to be based on reality.

[image: SHUC in community]

And his story reminded me of Sydenham-Heritage United Church. As we begin to imagine - over time - the pandemic easing, we need to rediscover who we are as a congregation. And I suggest we consider the wisdom of Draymond Green. Perhaps our own identity will be defined in part by what our community needs. Like Green, we can become whatever we need to be. We can use the needs of people inside and outside our congregation to at least in part help us decide who we are, and who we need to be. Are we willing to imagine our congregation as whoever it needs to be in Brantford in 2021 and beyond?

This particular week is the perfect time to admit that we are lost on our collective journey. This is the third Sunday in Lent. Last year, in 2020, the third Sunday in Lent was the last Sunday service we celebrated in this sanctuary. So this Sunday is like an anniversary of sorts. 1 year ago we were discussing the possibility of closing the church. And at the time, we thought we might have to close for at least 2 weeks. I don't think I need to comment on that.

Being lost on our journey is a great time to ask the ultimate question, "who are we?" And to be open to hearing answers from many directions. And we are all invited to

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that conversation. This week you will receive a letter from our Profile committee inviting us all into the wonderful opportunity to imagine who we are and who we want to be. That will be your official invitation to put your hand in.

[image: put your hand in]

I can't think of the story of Jesus clearing the temple without thinking of Anne Murray. And her 1970 song, "Put Your Hand in the Hand". She sang, "Every time I look into the holy book, I want to tremble. When I read about the part where a carpenter cleared the temple. For the buyers and the sellers were no different fellers than what I profess to be. And it causes me shame to know I'm not the gal that I should be. ... Take a look at yourself and you can look at others differently, by putting your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee." Let's all put our hand in.

We are lost in the middle of Lent. Being lost might sound like a bad thing. But realizing that you are lost is a blessing. Lent is only half over after all. To mis-quote Red Green, we are half way through Lent. If you think you've blown it, remember you've only half-blown it. Now get out there and finish the job. As we continue our journey through Lent. "Take a look at yourself and you can look at others differently, by putting your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee".

*Amen.*