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St. John's Episcopal Church
4th March 2018
Lent III B (John 2:13-22)

Life has returned to normal. The helicopters stopped flying after midnight yesterday morning, lock-downs have ended, the police have gone back to their duties, the community has breathed a sigh of relief: James Eric Davis, Jr., accused of killing his mother and father, has been found and is behind bars. And life has returned to normal. For us.

But life will never be the same for James Eric Davis, Jr., nor for Russell and Alexis, his brother and sister. And, of course, life has tragically ended for James Eric Davis, Sr., and Diva Davis, his mother and father who, we are told, had come to CMU to pick him up for Spring Break.

And life will never be quite the same for James' friends, or for friends and co-workers of James, Sr., and Diva. An appalling tragedy has ripped through many, many lives.

"The community can get back to normal," said Mt. Pleasant Director of Public Safety and Police Chief Paul Lauria.

Really.

Apparent drug use?

A falling out with his parents?

James, Sr.'s gun in the wrong hands at the wrong time?

There is much to speculate upon – and for now we are left with that. Speculation.

Before I fell asleep Friday night, helicopters buzzing nearby reminding me of the days in Manhattan after Nine-Eleven, I thought of James, Jr. I thought, "He is out there hiding. Probably cold, possibly hungry, and quite possibly overcome by grief as he begins to realize what he has done." I experienced a deep sadness as I thought of this broken child of God whose life is forever changed.

And I think of Nikolas Cruz, a lost and lonely killer, wrote the South Florida Sun-Sentinel. Another broken child of God whose brokenness, whose anger, led him to end the lives of fourteen high school students and three adults with an AR-15. Well, the gun did what it was designed to to: It killed people. And the deaths in Florida also bring me profound sadness, as you know. Sadness and anger and nearly a sense of hopelessness. Nearly. Not quite.

And today I think of Jesus. Entering the temple grounds, a holy sanctuary, and finding greed and corruption instead of peace and welcome.

The scene at the Temple must have been incredibly noisy, and it was certainly bloody. Jews who came from far away couldn't bring their own animals, so suitable animals were kept for sale in an outer court of the Temple. And to buy an offering, one had to use the correct money — Roman and Greek money had images on it, so it had to be exchanged for Temple money. All of this certainly led to a bit of profiteering.

Some of the less-than-honest merchants saw a marketing opportunity. They might have yelled out, “Only \$19.99 for these lovely lambs while stocks remain.” Or, “Attention, Temple shoppers — blue lantern specials on aisle three!” Sometimes an animal that was brought by a local would be judged not worthy of sacrifice, and a new animal had to be bought — another sales opportunity.

Seeing all this commerce in the outer courts of the Lord enraged Jesus. For the one and only time in the Gospel narratives, he seems to have lost his composure completely: He made a whip out of cords, drove the animals out of the courtyard, turned over tables, caused general chaos — it must have been quite a sight.

Did Jesus lose his temper because cheating was being done on holy ground? Or did he lose his temper because the poor were being extorted in the name of religion? Take your pick. Probably both.

Holy anger.

Today’s Gospel is about the cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem, but I suggest to you that it also points to us: That we all need to cleanse our own temples from time to time. We need to look deep within ourselves, examining that which is a bit dirty, a bit scary, a bit shameful, and offer our very *brokenness* up to God in Christ Jesus.

We offer our broken selves in prayer, in confession, and in sacrifice. We pray to God to make us holy, to forgive us over and over, and God does just that. When we engage in some introspection, self-examination, we sometimes discover things about ourselves we’re not very proud of — that’s OK, God will wipe them away. God will make us clean and whole again, and draw us back into a loving relationship.

And some of us don’t recognize that privilege, that grace, and our broken spirits lead us to dark acts of violence. And then we break the lives of others – sometimes even to the point of death.

I was looking at weaving projects Friday morning when Harry came into the study: “There’s been a shooting at Central. Two dead, others wounded.”

“Oh, no, God. Not here. Not another,” I thought. And I thought, “Please don’t let the shooter be Black.”

The details were unclear, rumors were running the Internet. I phoned our choral scholars to make sure they were OK. I texted a bunch of faculty and staff members and received reassuring responses.

Then the news started to clarify: Two dead, no others wounded, apparently a deliberate act by one young man, not a random shooting or the spraying of deadly bullets into a crowd, and the shooter was on the run. And, yes, Black. And then I started to worry: worry for any Black young men who might be in the vicinity. Worried about how the police would act if and when they found the shooter. Worried for our community – how safe were we?

And, of course, the helicopters and the police were by then making their presence very visible. Phone calls from the City, warnings to stay inside with doors locked, texts from friends that Ric’s was closed, news that the entire City was in virtual lockdown.

Through it all, thinking, "I cannot live in this fear, but I will be cautious."

And then, later, reflecting on the brokenness of our lives. And offering a prayer for all the broken children of God who see no other option than violence and death.

It's a dark Lent, isn't it. Parkland and now here. Very different circumstances, to be sure, but similar in their darkness.

Perhaps the tragedies can lead us more deeply into reflection and repentance; perhaps they can inspire us to a random act of kindness.

And perhaps they will lead us to cleanse our own temples and to renew our commitment toward a just and loving world.

I pray this may be so.

In the name of Christ,

Amen.