

**Third Sunday of Lent – Cycle B**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – March 4, 2018**  
**Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor**

Everyone's attention this weekend is focused on the motion picture industry, an industry that has changed a lot over the years. We used to see all newly-released movies in theatres, but they can now be seen almost immediately after release on any digital platform. As a result, small, quiet films spend almost no time in theatres. What Americans really go to the movies to see – those who still go to the movies at all, that is – what really packs the theatre is a good action film. There's nothing quite like a good explosion or exciting special effects – perhaps now in 3-D. You can watch movies with people having ordinary conversations on the big screen TV at home. If you are going to spend the extra money to go to the theatre these days, then you want excitement, you want to see someone get things done. You want a movie with an action hero.

The gospel passage we read today is about as close as Jesus ever comes to being portrayed as an "action hero." Oh, to be sure, Jesus is a hero throughout the gospels. He cures the sick and raises the dead and walks on water and turns water into wine and feeds thousands with a few loaves and fish. But he does most of these things quietly – with a word or a simple gesture. The gospels are not exactly action-packed. So today's account of the cleansing of the temple is a welcome change of pace. Here, for once, Jesus doesn't just speak out against evil – he takes action. St. John tells us that Jesus walked into the temple area – into this most sacred of spaces since the time of King David, for 1000 years before the time of Christ. Instead of finding people quietly gathering to pray, or even loudly singing and shouting God's praises, he found instead oxen and sheep and doves – merchants and money changers. He found a market place instead of a sacred space. Rather than just walking away or preaching against it, Jesus fashioned a whip out of cords and drove them out of the temple area. It must have been quite a sight – oxen moving one way, sheep moving another, doves fluttering overhead, the coins of the money changers rolling along the ground as their tables were overturned. "Take these out of here," he shouted, "and stop making my Father's house a marketplace."

Now if we were sitting in a theatre watching this play out on the screen, I suspect we would be clapping and cheering! There's our hero! Look at him clean out the place! We would naturally identify with Jesus or with his disciples. Zeal for your house shall consume me, they remembered from Scripture. Yeah, that's my kind of zeal. Show them who's boss, Jesus! The problem with this approach, of course, is that we are not Jesus. In this story, we aren't even the disciples, or the moneychangers, or the merchants or the Jewish bystanders. In this story, you see,

we are the temple. You and I are that sacred space, each of our souls is that holy ground that has too often become a marketplace.

Just like the temple mount, most of our souls have times of absolute piety, times when our minds and hearts are focused upon God. We spend time in prayer and praise, engaged in acts of charity, studying the Scriptures, trying to discern God's will for us. Most of us offer sacrifice to God, devote at least some portion of our lives to him. Deep in the recesses of our hearts, the Holy Spirit dwells. We visit that space from time to time. In those blessed moments, we enter the Holy of Holies and encounter the living God. But for all of those moments of prayer and charity and sacrifice, for all of those privileged encounters with God, we must candidly admit that there are plenty of merchants and moneychangers who occupy our time. We spend just as much energy trying to get ahead, trying to buy more. Oh, we may not be shopping for oxen or sheep or doves – but we're trying to get the latest gadget – or we're trying to pay off the credit card debt for what we've already acquired. Though we may be reluctant to admit it, our lives are far more filled with the secular than with the sacred. We spend more time trying to satisfy our every desire than trying to meet the needs of our brothers and sisters. We spend far more time trying to get more than trying to live with less. We spend far more time trying to control everyone and everything than we do acknowledging that there is only one God – and that we are not Him.

So this gospel of cleansing, this account of Jesus removing the market place from the sacred space, is a perfect fit for Lent. In this season, we are trying to remove from our lives what is not essential, to re-focus our lives on the Lord. In small sacrifices and in grand gestures, Lent calls us to put God at the center and to remove from our lives anything that is an obstacle or a distraction from our fundamental vocation of discipleship. As he did in this gospel passage, Jesus is walking onto the holy ground of our hearts and seeking to drive out the love of money, the love of power, the love of control and to plant in its place the seeds of contrition, of humility, of gratitude and of trust. Jesus seeks to drive out those sinful impulses, those urges within each of us to disregard those ten commandments we heard in the first reading. Two and a half weeks into Lent, those temptations are probably growing stronger, the desire to abandon our Lenten undertakings, our Lenten sacrifices – just this once – is probably bubbling up within us. It's only one little distraction, one little sin, one little ox or sheep or dove being sold, one little stand for the money changer taking root in our heart. And before we know it – one ox becomes a herd, one sheep becomes flock, one moneychanger becomes the path that leads us away from God. So today, in this season of Lent, we welcome Jesus the action hero – not to entertain us, but to cleanse and renew us – to eliminate from our lives what is non-essential and to restore the sacred into our secular and profane hearts.