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 Redwoods Presbyterian Church
 Larkspur, California
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John 2:13-22
 "Contemplating Death"

Dylan Thomas wrote a poem about contemplating death. It's called, "Do Not Go Gentle Into that Good Night."

Do not go gentle into that good night,
 Old age should burn and rage at close of day;
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
 Because their words had forked no lightning they
 Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
 Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
 And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
 Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
 Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
 Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
 Do not go gentle into that good night.
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

This is the third Sunday of Lent and the theme that suggests itself to me from the Gospel text is that of contemplating of death. It's a heavy theme but it is an aspect of Lent, the season of the church that precedes Easter.

A sub theme of this sermon is "rage." Dylan Thomas rages at the prospect of death, the injustice of death, as he sees it. Jesus flies into a rage after he enters God's house, the temple in Jerusalem, and sees that people have turned it into a shopping mall. For him, it's a violation of God's sacred space.

He cleanses the temple and connects the action with his death. Those around him say, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answers, "Destroy this temple, and in

three days I will raise it up.” The bystanders say, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” But, according to the text, Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

According to John, Jesus thought of his death from the beginning of his ministry. To be fair to John we need to say that Jesus thought more about life than death but death was on the path to life, his resurrection. That’s the Lenten theme: The road to the resurrection of Easter goes through the death of Good Friday.

Remarkably, one expression of Jesus’ affirmation of life is the cleansing of the temple. One can call this a kind of house-cleaning before he dies. We know from a fuller reading of scripture that Jesus goes through many emotions before he dies, one is his rage at the injustice of violating God’s house. For Jesus violation in this manner is death and like Dylan Thomas he rages at it.

One can call the cleansing of the temple his “Day of Rage.” The event is so important that it is recorded in all four gospels.

“Day of Rage” is what the protesters in Egypt and Libya called their days of righteous indignation against oppressive rulers when they gathered in Cairo’s Tahrir Square on January 25 and Tripoli’s Green Square on February 17 last year. They faced death-dealing of corruption and authoritarian rule in their countries and they raged in protest for the sake of a new democratic way of life.

Jesus railed against those who violated the temple. Scripture says it best: “The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, ‘Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!’ His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’”

One assumes that the whip of cords was meant to chase the animals out of the building and to scare the people and Jesus did not hurt anyone in the process. We don’t know. We know that he was consumed with righteous anger.

Indian scientist and environmentalist, Vandana Shiva, who leads the movement for the conservation of indigenous seeds and an active defender of biological, cultural and intellectual diversity says: “To be outraged by violation...is a necessary complement to being spiritual. To me this means that one has boundaries that say, ‘This is sacred, it cannot be violated.’ If rage is directed to protecting the sacred, it can become a creative rage, it can be a compassionate rage.”

One can call Jesus' cleansing of the temple a creative rage to protect the sacred space of the temple. His action then translates into Shiva's India and into every sphere of life. It's rage that deals with destructive, death-producing elements in life in order to affirm a higher form of life.

That's why Jesus could give as a sign for his action the destruction or death of his own body as the seed for new life. That's the Easter message and we will get there in a more full blown sense on Easter.

When we contemplate death in this sense we look to the cross of Jesus and appreciate his powerful love and compassion and passion for peace and justice which was too much for the authorities so they did him in.

In Lent, we follow Jesus to the cross as he encourages us to look to the destructive and death-producing things in our own lives and in the world. We see our own destructive behaviors – the put downs of ourselves and others which we do in spite of ourselves.

Listen to this poem by John van de Laar. It applies to people, governments and corporations:

Truth be told, Jesus,
 There are lots of tables that need overturning
 in our lives;
 Beneath the veneer of respectability
 the tidy rows and neat regulations
 hide dark addictions and angry judgements
 hungry greeds and heartless rejections

We know the pain - and so do those around us -
 of keeping up the facade;
 What a relief it would be to have it all
 upset, smashed, scattered, destroyed

So, perhaps, Jesus, today you could pay us a visit
 and help us to radically rearrange
 the furniture of our lives.

From: www.Sacredise.com

In Lent, we look at ways that humans demean and destroy other humans in every sphere of life. Open any newspaper and read the headlines: "Palo Alto teen thwacks three with stapler," "6 UK troops believed killed in Afghanistan," "Man who beat boy to death slain in prison." That's one day in the Chronicle this week.

In Lent, we look, as Vandana Shiva does, at ways human beings destroy our fragile and beautiful yet resilient earth. Suellen and I attended the San Francisco Ocean Film Festival this weekend. The movies portray humanity's destruction of the oceans and sea

life. That's Lent. More importantly, they portray the amazing work of biologists and regular people who care for the oceans. That's Easter and more of that on Easter Sunday. Next year we must plan a church outing to the 10th anniversary of the film festival.

It's only when we face various expressions of death that we can change what we see and move on to life. And it's okay to have some rage, righteous indignation over the injustice of things and of death itself. If it takes that to get our message across then by all means express rage. It's okay to be upset. According to Paul in his New Testament letters: It's okay to be angry but do not let the sun set on your anger. We can rage for a day and move on with peaceful and nonviolent actions which are more akin to the message of Jesus.

In Lent we contemplate death but only to emphasize life that grows out of death's demise. Amen.