Sermon: 7.3.21 (Exodus and John 2: 13-22)

I go among trees and sit still.

All my stirring becomes quiet

around me like circles on water.

My tasks lie in their places

where I left them, asleep like cattle.

Then what is afraid of me comes

and lives a while in my sight.

What it fears in me leaves me,

and the fear of me leaves it.

It sings, and I hear its song.

Then what I am afraid of comes.

I live for a while in its sight.

What I fear in it leaves it,

and the fear of it leaves me.

It sings, and I hear its song.

After days of labour,

mute in my consternations,

I hear my song at last,

and I sing it. As we sing,

the day turns, the trees move.

This poem by Wendell Berry is from his collection of Sabbath poems and is used by the poet-theologian Nicola Slee as the theme for her book, Sabbath. Through the verses of the poems and the God-given concept of Sabbath, she explores how to find space and time to enter into the Sabbath, the holy rest that, as we heard in our reading from Exodus, God commands of us and the Israelites entered into a covenant and agreed to. ‘Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy, a day to the Lord your God; for the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.’ The set of laws, the commandments, of which sabbath rest is one, were not meant to be a burden, but meant to lead to God’s people flourishing.

However, part of Nicola’s book explores how we might fear this sacred time of rest, fear of what allowing ourselves to stop completely might feel like, or how we might do so, or fear of the empty space we might create when we allow the sabbath in, or even fear of ‘wasting’ this restful time by listening to our bodies need to sleep, to heal. There is a difference in the time of resting from work that simply allows us to catch up with everything else that needs to be done, and the type of rest that allows us to just simply ‘be’ and relax in the presence and beauty of God. This second type of rest is the rest that replenishes our souls, the invitation into the woods, a place where we leave our tasks behind, face our fears until we hear our song again, the song of our creator. This type of rest is where the sabbath becomes a gift as well as a commandment, and not just for us but for the whole of creation, the land, the animals, everything must rest, where time becomes sacred.

If this commandment to sabbath is where time becomes sacred, we can start to turn to our Gospel passage, the one where space becomes sacred. The sacred space that is the physical temple is the place where Jesus lets us know that he is the resting place of God, and it is with him that we are called to be. It would be really easy to see our Gospel passage today as one where Jesus comes into the temple, sees the money lenders, those people selling cattle, doves and sheep and being appalled that this was going on in his Father’s house, a temple, a place of praise. And so, in a fit of righteous anger, turfs them all out, whips the animals out the door, turns the tables over in a fit of rage. But if we do that, then we are forgetting that Jesus grew up going into temples and seeing scenes like this his entire life. It wasn’t a new thing for Jesus to be shocked at, the money changers and animal sellers had a right to be there. The animals because of the Torah’s requirement of sacrifice and the money changers in order to change pilgrims’ money into coins that the temple accepted to buy the sacrifices and for the half-shekel tax imposed on all Jews. This is not Jesus cleansing all things financial and commercial from the temple, this is Jesus setting apart the sacred space because what had been happening was no longer necessary. People had been waiting for this moment to arrive, it was foretold in Zechariah that “there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts ON THAT DAY.”, the day when the Lord comes to Jerusalem, and this day is now. With Jesus, all aspects of life are sacred, there is no need for these kind of sacrificial offerings any more, THAT day has come.

So how are we then meant to live as Christians, now that Jesus is in the temple and God is no longer to be confined to one place, but walking amongst us, in our streets, in the people we meet, in our homes? Jesus came not to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfil them. He shows us how to live a life lived fully to the law and to thrive and flourish within it because, as we heard in our readings, through God, our time becomes sacred and the space in which we find God and ourselves becomes sacred. Due to the pandemic, It might feel like our time and space are even more blurred at the moment, routines are not as they were, and it can be hard to find space and time for holiness.

When we say morning prayer together over zoom, I am worshipping on the same screen I use for emails, for writing assignments, for shopping, for recording assemblies, watching YouTube and now too for praying. Worship for my family takes place on a Sunday morning in the same room as the dog will be wanting to play with his squeaky toy sprout and where my children have been doing their home learning, and where later on we will spend time together playing board games and watching a film. There has been little chance for an invitation into the woods to spend time resting until we hear God’s song singing in our hearts once more. If you are finding it hard to find sacred time for sabbath, for resting in God’s presence because everything is blurred and you feel weary, you won’t be alone in this. We are not machines, we need calm and rest just like the mammals who have hibernated and the fields that have been left to fallow. (Nicola Slee, Sabbath).

Things have felt blurred, and yet it is through this fuzziness that God has broken through to our homes and screens. We may all have different places where we prefer to connect with God, be that amongst the trees, in a church, in our homes, on our own or in the company of others. When Jesus cleanses the temple, it is a reminder to us that we are called simply to be with God, that we are enough on our own, that God does not require of us hard sacrifices, but a heart that responds to the call of the one who loves us, who wants us to rest and to thrive and respond to God’s beautiful song of holiness.

Amen.