

**Reflection on the Word: Lent 3, March 7, 2021**  
**Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; John 2:13-22**

Of all the gospels, only the gospel of John tells the story of the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke this story, found near the end of his ministry, seems to be a kind of "one last straw" event, infuriating the religious leaders and precipitating the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus.

Why would John place this story differently from the other gospel writers? Could it be that in this story of turning over the tables in the temple, he saw something that was foundational to who Jesus was and what his ministry was about?

What does this story tell us about Jesus and his values?  
And how does this story shape what we think about Jesus?

Jesus goes to the temple, and impassioned about what he sees going on there, with the selling of animals for sacrifice and the exchange of currency for paying the temple tax, he makes a whip out of rope and drives everything and everyone out of the Temple, overturning the tables of the money changers with the words: "Don't make my father's house a marketplace!" (that is, a place of business).

It's interesting that these words are different from those found in the other gospels where Jesus says they have made the temple "a den of thieves," leading us to believe that there is a lot of cheating and exploitation going on ... That those exchanging the money and selling unblemished animals for sacrifice are somehow cheating the poor people

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who have little choice but to do business with them. But in John's gospel, Jesus appears to be upset not by some kind of thievery, but by the system itself – by what is the common and acceptable practice or custom for the temple.

Could it be that the writer of John's gospel, looking back at this story, is trying to make the claim that Jesus had come into the world to make God available to people in a whole new way?

What was it about the business of the Jerusalem temple that frustrated and upset Jesus to the point that he went and turned everything upside down? Perhaps it was that the temple was what got in the way of people recognizing him. Everyone was so caught up in the longstanding rituals of offering sacrifice and the requirements around paying the temple tax, that they couldn't see the new thing God was doing in Jesus.

If we were to read back into the first chapter of the gospel, we would hear John the Baptist saying that Jesus is the one who takes away the sin of the world. That being said, there would be no further need for animal sacrifices to atone for the sin of the people. And so, perhaps the gospel writer is implying that with the coming of Jesus, there was no need for those temple business practices of changing money and purchasing animals for sacrifice ... the temple could once more be the place of prayer and devotion it was intended to be ... because Jesus, through his life, death and resurrection *was* sufficient and *is* sufficient to mediate God's grace and mercy. God was doing a new thing in Jesus.

### 3.

As we read on in John's gospel, it becomes clear that this incident in the temple was just the beginning ... That the rest of Jesus' ministry would continue to be about overturning things, as he had the tables in the temple – overturning things that kept people from encountering God and receiving the gift of God's abundant life which was being offered to the world in and through Jesus' very life and example.

Jesus' anger in the temple was not just raw emotion or outburst. It was anger, mixed with sadness, at the way things were and a desire to bring about change. It was a call to justice and fairness. What we sometimes forget is that anger is not always a negative emotion. Anger can be a positive tool - used as a catalyst for discomfort and for engaging in that dialogue which brings people to a place of seeing and acting differently, which helps to build up the community of God's people.

There are many things, many injustices in this world that make (or should make) us angry. Things like claims of fake news which incite whole groups of people to violence or irrational thinking. Like refugees fleeing horrendous situations of oppression and violence, often waiting years in uncertainty and fear, longing for a safe place to live and raise their children. Perhaps you have felt saddened, even angered, like those who mourn the death of 16 year old Lexi Daken, by lack of access to good mental health care. I rage at exploitation of women and children for sexual purposes. Prejudice and racial profiling. Drug trafficking.

### 4.

Bullying. Starving children ... What are the injustices that make you angry?

Those of us who follow Jesus need to allow his commitment to shape our commitment – we need to let the things he got worked up about shape the things we get worked up about. And as we read on through John's gospel, we see many stories that reveal what Jesus cared about and thought needed to be changed.

He reached out on a Sabbath to heal a man who couldn't walk. He wasn't supposed to do that – it was breaking the law to heal on the Sabbath, but “healing delayed is healing denied”, Jesus might have said.

There was the time he fed thousands miraculously with a few loaves and fish – He fed them with food but he also offered his body to assuage their deepest hunger: “I am the Bread of Life.” It is clear, in John's gospel, that Jesus' intent is to nourish life in hungry people, including those who are hungry in spirit.

Then there is the story of his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. As a Jewish man, he should not have approached this woman, and certainly not a woman who was a foreigner, an outsider, detested by the Jewish community. But Jesus was determined to cross boundaries that had been erected and to welcome this woman, and her whole community, as they seek an encounter with him.

In yet another story, Jesus is asked about a woman caught in adultery – He could have judged her harshly, but he didn't. Instead, he challenged the bystanders who were

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ready to stone her, saying, “Whoever has committed no sin, let them cast the first stone” ... and not a person dared to do it. By his words and action, Jesus gave the woman back her life and her dignity.

Time and again, Jesus spoke passionately about the need for his followers to love one another and to show that love in acts of forgiveness, service, and sacrifice. And in John’s gospel, it is basically Christ’s love for the world that gets him killed.

Where does our passion for Christ’s commitment and our resolve to follow him put us at risk? Or does it? Do we fail to make ourselves vulnerable, to risk the hostile stare, to cross the boundary of our own comfort level for the sake of another? for the sake of what is right and just?

Just prior to this temple incident in John’s gospel, is the story of the wedding at Cana where Jesus changes the water into wine. These two stories are each held in juxtaposition of the other. One in reference to the blessing of abundance Jesus offers; the other highlighting the challenge he poses. On the one hand, is the blessing he wants to give, and on the other, the change he requires. It has been suggested by preachers like Carla Pratt Keyes that a journey with Jesus will always include both – abundance and challenge; blessing and change; joy and anger.

And we who follow Jesus must keep our eyes and hearts open ... so that as we meet God in Jesus, we might also be enabled to see what God sees.

## 6.

In Jesus, we see how beautiful and beloved *we all are* in God’s eyes – a seeing that gives reason for joy. Through Jesus, we also see how broken and mean-spirited we can be and how entrenched we’ve become in systems that deny people the abundant life God wants for them – a seeing that often gives reason for anger.

The people to whom John was writing in his gospel lived just a few decades after Rome’s destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and they were still trying to figure out how to get along without a Temple. But in reading John’s gospel they were comforted in that there was another Temple. And it was Jesus. Where once their connection to God’s grace was through the ritual and the sacrifices that had been part of temple life, they now came to recognize that deep connection to God could be found through Jesus. Not through a building. Not encased in stone and mortar, custom and ritual. But, in Him.

We, too, celebrate the love and grace of God, incarnate in Jesus. And as followers of his way, as those who are the church, the Body of Christ, we, in whom his Spirit dwells, become witnesses to that divine love and grace in the world ... and it’s not just about the words we say. Our calling is to embody Jesus for others; and in word and action, to communicate the love of God, the presence of God. And to recognize that what moved Jesus to joy, or to anger, ought to move us too. Amen.