

Year B 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent The Sign of Jesus' Authority Over the Temple John 2:13-22

All four gospels tell the story of Jesus clearing out the Temple so we know how important this action was. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell this story closer to the end of Jesus' life. But John, who we read today, puts it right at the beginning. It sets the stage, so to speak, for the rest of Jesus' ministry in this gospel. Why was it so important?

For many, this is a disturbing picture of Jesus – our good and gentle shepherd demonstrating a physical manifestation of anger. Jesus walks into the temple, sees the consumerism that has taken over, and flies into a rage. But, is this really what is going on? Let's think this through.

Our first clue is that John tells us that Passover was nearly here. You may remember that Passover is the yearly commemoration of the time when God delivered his people out of bondage in Egypt. God freed the Israelites from the oppression and injustice of empire and brought them to a new land with a new set of rules – rules that established justice, fair treatment of all people, and mercy and kindness toward the vulnerable in society. It was to be a society free from the greed and the need for more, more, more of consumerism. After setting this up for us, John tells us Jesus enters the Temple and what is he confronted with? Consumerism and the drive to make a buck that goes along with it. That's not all. He was confronted with a society divided by social status and gender. He was confronted by a place where foreigners were treated as outsiders and as "lesser than." In other words, Jesus was confronted by the heart of a society that was not functioning the way God had intended. What made matters even worse was that all of this was being done in the name of worshipping God.

So, Jesus saw all of this and flew into a rage, right? No...actually, Jesus saw all of this and sat down and did some weaving. He wove some cords into a whip. Jesus had seen the temple many times before. He was not suddenly consumed with anger upon seeing the

scene this time. But this time he was going to do something about it. The story right before this is the one where he changes water into wine at a wedding. You may recall that when his mother told him to take care of the wine shortage he first said no – it was not yet his time. He ended up doing what his mother suggested though. It was his mother after all. But that story tells us that Jesus does what he needs to do at the right time. This time when he walked into the temple, it was the right time. He was about to embark on the mission in the world for which he had been sent and he was going to let the people know what this mission was all about.

Jesus cleared out all of the people who had made his Father's house a market place – a place where money meant more than God and greedy merchants swindled the naïve worshippers into paying too much, exchanging their foreign currency for too little. The message Jesus sent is clear: It's time to live the way God intends for you to live.

Interestingly, Jesus also clears out the animals used for the sacrifices. What was that all about? He gives us the answer a little later – he is replacing the temple. Sacrifices were meant to establish a right relationship with God. Jesus was going to make that unnecessary and give us a direct relationship with God.

For centuries the prophets had been saying exactly that. Killing an animal does not put you in right relationship with God. The whole point to the sacrifice was that it was meant to show what was in the person's heart – the person was offering something to God because the person was sorry for a wrongful behavior and truly wanted to be in right relationship. Like bringing flowers home to say you're sorry. The problem was the outward show of the sacrifice got disconnected from the inward repentance and the act of the sacrifice itself was seen as the thing bringing about the repair in the relationship. People were "worshipping" outwardly but not sincerely.

So, Jesus made his whip and then flew into a rage and drove everyone out? No. The reaction of his disciples gives us another clue. They watched him do this and the thought that popped into their minds was a psalm (69.9) that said, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” Zeal means energy or enthusiasm for a cause. Some words given in the dictionary for meaning the same thing as zeal are fervor, ardor, and, interestingly, love. No mention of anger though. That doesn’t mean that Jesus didn’t feel angry at all. Think of a cause that you’re passionate about – animal abuse, systemic racism, the environment. Chances are your zeal for the cause is fueled by some anger that you feel at the cruelty or injustice or abuse that you see. The anger can be part of the fuel but it isn’t the reason for acting. Desiring change is the reason for acting – zeal for the cause is the reason for acting.

The reaction of the temple authorities is very curious. If someone walked into a local church with a whip and drove out the women selling the pies leftover from yesterday’s bake sale, chances are someone would be calling the police. But the temple authorities don’t bring in the bouncers. They ask Jesus an odd question: “What sign can you show us for doing this?” they demanded. What sign can you show us? You know who get asked for signs? Prophets. Prophets get asked for a sign. Jesus has taken on the familiar role of a prophet in their eyes. Jesus was delivering a message from God and they were now asking for authenticating proof. If you’re a prophet delivering God’s message, then we want proof of that. We want proof that you carry the authority of God with you.

Contrary to what pops into our heads these days, prophecy was not telling the future. Prophecy was a communication tool used by God to try to get his people to turn back to him. They were living lives that went against life in God’s kingdom and God wanted them to stop what they were doing, and turn back to him, because life without him would get rough. This was precisely what Jesus was doing. He was strongly sending the message that they had turned from God and needed to turn back.

And the sign he offers as proof of his authority? “Destroy this temple,” Jesus says, “and in three days I will raise it up.” They didn’t understand that he was talking about his death and resurrection. But if you want proof that Jesus carried the authority of God, then his death and resurrection is the ultimate proof. Jesus - God made flesh – was murdered. He was dead and buried but he didn’t stay dead. The ultimate proof of his authority – he even rules over death. The disciples confirm this for us. When Jesus was raised from the dead, they remembered that he had said this today in the temple. And John writes that they believed – they believed the Scripture and the words Jesus had spoken. Suddenly the words of Jesus are equated with the word of God. One and the same. Jesus’ words carry the authority of God.

Jesus waltzes into our world today with a prophetic message. The people are not living lives appropriate for God’s kingdom. The people must change what they are doing, turn to God, because life without God will be rough. The zeal for this cause – to bring people into relationship with God – consumes him. It fires him up and fills his every word and action. The love that brought him to the cross brings him to us.

Today Jesus shows exactly what needs to be done to worship God sincerely, to be in right relationship. He clears the junk out of the way. He wipes away the worldly thinking that seems more important than God and leaves the path clear to right worship. “Zeal for your house will consume me” we hear the disciples say. The thing is, Jesus replaces God’s house and Jesus tells us later in John’s Gospel that if we abide in him, he will abide in us...God’s house.

Sometimes we don’t see what Jesus is doing. Sometimes we don’t hear him calling out his message...or we hear but don’t listen. Let us spend some time this Lent listening, discerning what needs to be cleared out so that we are worshipping God not only with our lips but in our lives. Zeal for your house will consume me.