

“Raising the Temple”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 16, 2022

2nd Sunday after Epiphany

Psalm 36:1-10

Rev. John Wahl

John 2:13-25

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I’ll raise it up.” (v. 19)

This story of the cleansing of the temple is found in all four of the gospels, but only John locates it here, near the beginning, rather than at the end of Jesus’ ministry. In the other gospels, this is the final provocative act that precipitates his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. John, however, uses this same scene to announce the inauguration of a new era: one in which the grace of God is no longer mediated or accessed through the ritual of cultic sacrifice but, instead, is available to all who receive Jesus as God’s Messiah.

Like thousands of Jews did each spring, Jesus practices his religious piety by going to the Jerusalem for the Passover. In the temple, he sees what any pilgrim would expect to find during the festival: a place bustling with religious and economic activity. John focuses the scene on the changing of money; and the selling of cattle, sheep, and doves that were used for sacrifices.

This is the first of three times that John will tell us of Jesus visiting Jerusalem for the Passover. It comes immediately after the wedding in Cana, where Jesus performed his first sign: changing water into wine. In that story, Jesus’ actions are hidden: we don’t see the water turned into wine; we only hear Jesus’ command to the servants to fill the jars with water. Everyone else marvels that the host has saved the best wine until last.¹

By contrast, in this story, Jesus acts with bold, unmistakable gestures. He makes a whip; not to lash the merchants, but to drive out the sheep and cattle; as a shepherd would lead a flock away from danger. Jesus scatters coins and overturns the tables in the marketplace but hurts no-one: this is an act of protest, not violence. Disrupting the expected economic practices of the temple, Jesus publicly reveals he is more than just a pilgrim visiting the temple. As the Son of God, the temple in whom the presence of God dwells, he has the authority to disrupt the

¹ Robert Hoch from *WorkingPreacher.com*

temple's usual activities. Jesus is announcing an end to this long-established way of relating to God.

For, if Jesus himself is the temple, which – when destroyed – will be raised again in three days, then the people of God need not make this annual pilgrimage to be in God's presence; they need not exchange money to purchase animals to be sacrifices; instead, the ultimate sacrifice will be made, for them, by Jesus.

Given that John's gospel was written well after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans – which took place in the year 70 BCE – the gospel writer's insistence, and perhaps reassurance, to his community that they would find mercy in Christ rather than inside the temple, and within the sacrificial system, makes both practical and theological sense.² While there was no longer a physical temple to which they could go, Christ, the true temple, was present with them wherever they were.

Turning the water into wine at the wedding was not a rejection of Jewish purification rituals, but instead showed how God was creating something deeper and richer out of Judaism and God's covenant with the people of Israel: like an abundance of new wine. By cleansing the temple (getting rid of the moneychangers and animal sellers) Jesus is not ridding the temple of Judaism; but of those practices that were separating people from the heart of Judaism: God's promises to be with the people, the transformative power of prayer, the hope of being a light to the nations, and the renewal of all creation to live in shalom.³

Jesus saw this complex system of animal sacrifice that had developed at the temple – which involved an entire marketplace of money changers and animal sellers – as a distortion of his own religion. The reason for coming to the temple – his Father's house – was not to fulfill a sacrificial obligation, but to be in God's presence. Here, Jesus is announcing himself as the new temple: the place where God's presence dwells. In Christ, God has chosen to come to us, to dwell among us. We believe that the church – the body of Christ – can never be destroyed. We are not asked to bring a sacrifice because, in Christ, the eternal sacrifice has already been made.

Many of us tend to think of church as a destination. It's the place where you go to receive spiritual things; religious goods and services. But, taking a cue from John's gospel, maybe we have things backwards. Rather than imagining it (exclusively) as a place we *go to* for some experience of God, maybe we should be

² David Lose, "Igniting Centrifugal Force"

³ From *RevGalPals.org*

thinking of church as a place that we are *sent from* in order to meet, and partner with, God.

This does not mean that coming to church is unimportant. We gather because in the proclamation of the gospel and the sharing of the sacraments we perceive God's grace. When we worship and pray and share in fellowship together, we learn more of who we are as the people of God and how God is calling us to respond. Then, we are sent out, as God's people, to become partners with God in our various roles and circumstances to love and bless the people and the world that God loves so much.

Think about it, in the church we identify and ordain elders and deacons who will lead and serve the people of the church. But do we pay as much attention to those people who serve roles of leadership and service in our community? We commission our youth before they depart for mission trips, but do we recognize everyone who offers their time and energy quietly and behind the scenes? We honor and thank musicians and teachers for what they do in the church, but do we also bless those who are teaching our children in school, or singing songs as caregivers to the elderly?

John wants his readers to know that Jesus calls the church not only to gather together but also to be sent out. While prayer and care, mission and giving, can and should and do take place within these four walls of the church, we know that not everyone who needs to hear the gospel and see God's love witnessed through us is here. When the church focuses only on its internal rituals, traditions, and activities, we lose sight of where God is sending us. We are the body of Christ; we are God's dwelling place. God will go where we go: into our homes and our schools, in our workplaces and gathering spots; wherever we are, God dwells within us.

Thus, the role, and authority, of the church does not rest in what it regulates – what we deem to be righteous or acceptable – but in how it creates community and opens people to an experience of God. Too often, the church gets defined by what it opposes: it used to be dancing or playing cards, then women in ministry, and more recently abortion rights or same-sex relationships. By staging his non-violent protest in the temple, scattering coins and saving animals from being sacrifices, Jesus was proclaiming that the church is not about amassing resources or requiring sacrifices; it is, instead, about sharing what we are given and celebrating life.⁴ Like Dr. King after him, Jesus knew that the time is always right to do what is right.”

⁴ Gilberto Ruiz from *WorkingPreacher.org*

When we worship – whether gathering together in a church building or at home virtually, or practicing our faith wherever God dwells – we create habits. Sometimes, those habits grow stagnant: they become empty rituals, void of purpose and meaning. On the other hand, our habits can help us to create a *habitus* – a way of perceiving and experiencing the world – where God is present and at the center of our lives. These spiritual practices – prayer and meditation, fellowship and charity, just to name a few – serve as reminders, signs, that God is with us; that we have been called and sent by God to proclaim the good news in word and action.

In this way, we raise the temple: through our habits and practices, we build ourselves, and one another, up in order to be ready to withstand the challenges and handle the uncertainties that life inevitably brings. The church is the body of Christ – the temple in whom God dwells – that is now made manifest in every corner of creation, for those who choose to believe. Amen.