

## Passion for God

### John 2:13-22

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15 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. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22 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.

Last week's scripture focused on two Lenten questions. "What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?" "What is the cost of Discipleship?" Today's scripture focuses on the questions "What does it mean to be the church of Jesus?" "What does it mean to have passion for God's proper worship?" As our scripture begins, Passover is near. Hearts and minds are focused on the exodus event and expectations of deliverance. A faithful Jew, Jesus comes to the temple, sacred space, the dwelling place of God on the earth. It was a magnificent place. In a futile effort to win over his "ungrateful" subjects, Herod the Great in 20 BCE had begun a massive restoration and expansion of the temple that was still underway in Jesus' day and even at the time of Jesus' Passover trip to Jerusalem. What a sight it must have been!

But appearances can be deceiving. Entering the temple precincts Jesus found little in the way of sacred space. The Court of the Gentiles looked and sounded like an open-air market. Cattle bellowing, sheep bleating, turtledoves cooing, people yelling, coins clanging. Ironically, the activity was necessary for the functioning of the temple! The temple tax had to be paid in temple coinage. The pilgrims to

Passover exchanged their Roman coins, which bore the image of the emperor, for imageless coins acceptable for the temple tax. Therefore, money changers were necessary. Because sacrificial animals had to be without blemish, sellers of sacrificial animals were necessary. After all, who could make it all the way to Jerusalem with an unblemished animal? All of this activity was in service to the temple, but ... did these services have to be rendered inside the temple precincts? Was it necessary to rob the Gentiles of the one area in the temple precincts they were allowed to enter and pray?

Entering the temple, Jesus discovered how deceiving appearances can be. While the place appeared to fulfill its function, closer inspection revealed that it had forgotten its purpose. The trappings were still in place but the place had no heart for its reason for existence. It had been taken over by buyers and sellers, consumers and marketers who knew how to fill the pews and meet the capital campaign goals.

I was once a member of a congregation where people came to get their Avon orders filled. Once there was a suggestion that we sell Amway products and give part of the proceeds to the church. One member sold cruises, not to the Holy Land, but to the Caribbean. Then there were the traditional chicken dinners and fish fries. They were always looking for ways to increase the finances, except being faithful stewards.

The ways of the world invade the church gradually, subtly, never intentionally, always in service of the church and its mission. Soon the church is full of cattle and sheep and turtledoves and money changers!

What Jesus saw was an outrage. Moving through the “market” with a whip, he created holy havoc. He left no tables unturned and no one untouched. Imagine the scene: tables turning over, coins bouncing across the floor, animals squealing and

running wildly, the flapping of turtledove wings, and Jesus crying out, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

His action is in the tradition of Israel’s prophets who cried out in protest against profaning of the temple, against debasing the worship of the Lord, against substituting ritual for devotion. Isaiah 56:7 says:

these I will bring to my holy mountain,  
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;  
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices  
will be accepted on my altar;  
for my house shall be called a house of prayer  
for all peoples.

Jeremiah 7:11 says:

Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD.

Zechariah 14:21 says:

and every cooking pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the LORD of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and use them to boil the flesh of the sacrifice. And there shall no longer be traders<sup>[a]</sup> in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day.

Challenges to the status quo will always be disputed. And Jesus had issued some challenge. Notice that those challenged did not ask “why” Jesus had acted in this way. They knew that one day the Lord or the Lord’s anointed would suddenly appear in the temple to straighten things out. They knew Malachi 3:1, which says:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

They saw Jesus had passion for God’s worship, but they asked Jesus for evidence that he was the one with the authority to do this! After all, they were doing the things the way they were doing them because they believed they were doing them right. They had no intention of violating God’s purposes, and they would never knowingly oppose God. Isn’t that always the case? Yet Jesus’ words

and actions suggested that the temple functionaries were actually acting in opposition to God's purposes!

In verse 19 Jesus continued his blistering temple critique. "You destroy this temple ..." If there is any destruction of the temple going on, it is his challengers who are doing the deed. Ouch! Frederick Buechner suggests that "There is no better proof for the existence of God than the way year after year he survives the way his professional friends treat him." "You destroy this temple ... in three days I will raise it up."

Now John uses a favorite pattern: Jesus speaks, his words are misunderstood, and clarification follows (cf. John 3:1–10; 4:1–26). The religious leaders assume that Jesus is referring to the magnificent Herodian temple. The idea that Jesus might rebuild such a temple in three days is ludicrous at worst and unreasonable at best ... when misunderstood. John's Gospel continually warns us against the danger of misunderstanding—thinking we understand Jesus, when the Jesus we think we understand is a Jesus of our own design, a Jesus with whom we are quite comfortable. But what if there is more to his words than we are hearing, more to his will than we are doing?

John provides the necessary clarification and a glimpse of things to come. Jesus is not speaking of the physical temple but of his own body. His challengers will seek to destroy him. They will think the deed is done, that not one bone of his body is left standing. For an instant, the shadow of the cross falls over the narrative. But the cross will not be the end, for Jesus will rise from the dead. People will try to destroy him; they still do, but our efforts are in vain, for not even the tomb can hold him; he will be "raised from the dead" (v. 22)!

Even the disciples did not, could not, would not understand Jesus' words until after the resurrection. Then many things that had mystified them about Jesus and

his work became clear. Then they remembered his life in light of Old Testament texts such as Psalm 69:9 which says:

It is zeal for your house that has consumed me;  
the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.

And they remembered Jesus' own words (v. 22). The message of John to us is clear. You cannot understand Jesus until you have the whole story. During Lent we are reminded that the story of Jesus culminates at the cross but does not end there. Taking only parts of the story will lead us to an incomplete and inadequate understanding of Jesus. Hearing the incomplete story...we misunderstand his prophetic zeal, his passion for God, his passion for godly worship, and so much more. And that might leave us in a temple of our own construction that is dedicated to the purposes of God but actually stands in opposition to them. **W.**

### **Hulitt Gloer**

Hearing this story, we can feel queasy in the pit of the stomach when Jesus takes up his whip and drives the money changers from the temple. Queasy because along with the surge of righteous adrenaline that is produced when Jesus shifts into his prophetic mode comes the sneaking fear that we might have more in common with the targets of his judgment than with the righteousness of his cause. For many of us, Jesus is irresistibly attractive when he is confronting injustice, hypocrisy, and the misappropriation of God's name. These actions place him squarely in the great tradition of the OT prophets, whose words and visions thrill and empower us when the weak are exploited by the powerful. The desire to have wrongs righted, looking toward the day when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, is deeply rooted in our hearts as we encounter the living God.

Yet the targets of Jesus' displeasure are not kings in remote palaces, or the forces of empires seen or unseen, or pagan rulers who may never have heard of the God of Israel. No, driven before him are the money changers, whose tables were

tolerated, even encouraged, by the temple authorities, who should have known better. They had made a career of studying the word of God. They were committed to building up institutions to proclaim and embody that word, and yet they had somehow managed to accommodate the money changers. More than likely, all involved had simply settled into comfortable behaviors that enabled them to meet their goals, turning an increasingly blind eye to the possibilities they were missing the goal of true worship. **Paul C. Shupe**

Lent offers an opportunity to ask whether we may be “destroying” the temple and true worship! So, let us follow Jesus’ example and have a passion for God and the things of God, especially worship that honors God in spirit and in truth.