

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
March 8, 2020
Entering the Passion of Jesus: Picturing Ourselves in the Story
Lent 2: The Temple: Risking Righteous Anger
Scripture: Psalm 69:8-16
John 2:13-21

“I’ll stay by his side, no matter where this leads.” As we explore the events of Holy Week, are we really ready to stay by Jesus no matter where it leads – no matter what we discover, no matter what we may learn about Jesus or about ourselves?

This event that we call the cleansing of the temple occurs in all four gospels, but, as is true of most gospel accounts, there are differences. The most obvious difference is where the Gospel writers tell about this event. Matthew, Mark, and Luke place this event during Holy Week, but for some reason John places this event near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry – but also during Passover.

Matthew, Mark, & Luke all have Jesus saying that the temple is supposed to be a house of worship for all nations, but that it had become a den of thieves. John, on the other hand, has Jesus saying that they were making the temple into a marketplace.

In all four gospels though we meet a Jesus who seems different than the Jesus we normally like to think about. We see a Jesus who is angry – very angry, and who is acting violently. It’s all very confusing – and quite frankly not one of my favorite events in Jesus’ life.

So, let me try to sort it out a little and at the same time ask why it makes a difference for us. All four Gospels tell about this event, so we can

be pretty sure that it was not just a story, but something that really happened.

For many of us, when we think temple, we may equate it with our church. When the original plans for this church were drawn, they included three buildings connected by glass walkways and this very high sanctuary roof was 20 feet higher than it is. The decision was made that the building was much larger than was needed; one building was removed, and the height of the sanctuary roof was lowered by 20 feet.

But as large as this worship complex might have been, it was minute compared to the temple in Jerusalem. The temple in Jerusalem was enormous. It was as large as 12 soccer fields put end to end. It consisted of several different courts or sections for different purposes and for different people. The outer court – the Court of Gentiles – was open to everyone and it was here that this incident occurred.

When Jesus turned the tables over in one section, it was a symbolic action, it didn't shut down the temple and would not have made much of a difference given the size of the complex. More than likely, people in a different section of the temple might not even have known what was happening.

One of the commentators I read says this is a symbolic action that intends on a big scale what it accomplishes on a very small scale. The comparison was made to the occasion when protestors splattered blood on draft files in one single office during the Vietnam War. That action did not shut down the Pentagon literally, but rather shut it down symbolically.¹ It was not a “cleansing” of the temple but a symbolic destruction of the temple. However, it was such a huge symbolic action that many people remember it today. We may remember the outrage and anger that many

people felt after that event – and if we do, we might have an idea of the anger that would have been felt by the temple authorities.

Almost anything more I would say about the very complicated system of temple worship and sacrifice would be an oversimplification and take much longer than you are likely willing to listen to me, so I'm not going to get into it too much, but rather try to look at what this action means for us and the questions we should be asking ourselves today.

When we look at what Jesus said, either that what is supposed to be a house of worship for all nations has become a den of thieves or that they have turned the temple into a marketplace, it is easy to think that the vendors in the temple were selling things they didn't need to sell or that they were selling them at exorbitant prices and cheating those who came to the temple. Probably neither or these would have been true.

A couple of commentators note that the everyday injustice of the way the people lived would have made them robbers on some level and that they thought the temple was their safe house, "a den, hideaway or place of security. The temple is not the place where the robbery occurs, but the place the robbers go for refuge."ⁱⁱ

Another commentatorⁱⁱⁱ wrote, "What Jesus is trying to get them to see is that they need to get their priorities straight. The business of the temple must be the business for which God established it. They cannot allow the culture to dictate its agenda, its leadership, its mission, or its standards. They must be prepared to follow God, even when it means moving against the culture. They must be prepared to follow God, because things will not stay the same. Change is coming."

I think the question for us today is, "Are we involved in the business for which God established the temple and the church?" When Jesus

proclaims that the temple has become a den of robbers, he is recalling words from the prophet Jeremiah, where Jeremiah accuses people of being hypocrites and acting righteous when they are in the temple, but acting otherwise when they are living their daily lives. God is a God of justice, mercy, and righteousness and when our worship becomes a substitute for justice and mercy then we are not being about the business that God has established for the temple or the church.

In our daily lives are we living out the things that were the real passions of Jesus? Are we living our lives together in such a way that our place of worship is one where all people are truly welcome? Are we involved in acts of mercy and justice or are we focused only on ourselves?

After Christmas, I read a quote from the great theologian, author and civil rights leader Howard Thurman. He wrote:

When the song of the angels is stilled
When the stay in the sky is gone
When the kings and princes are home
When the shepherds are back with their flocks
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace among the people
To make music in the heart.^{IV}

The Lenten season is a good time to ask ourselves those questions again. It's a good time to remember the work of Christmas, the things that God calls us to be doing both as a church and as individual followers of Jesus.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem for this Passover celebration, he was greeted by people crying "Hosanna" – Save us. Last week we thought

about how this would have alerted the Roman authorities and how 5 days later it led to his death on a cross. Jesus did not try to lay low that week. His actions in the temple drew attention to him and stirred up more anger against him.

Marcus Borg and Domenic Crossan in their book The Last Week argue that “Jerusalem had to be taken by a nonviolent messiah rather than by a violent revolution, and the temple ritual had to empower justice rather than excuse one from it. What is involved for Jesus is an absolute criticism not only of violent domination, but of any religious collaboration with it.”^v

Jesus was standing in the tradition and with the prophets of Israel like Zechariah and Jeremiah who spoke for non-violence, who spoke against injustice and against selling out to an imperial government.

One of the reasons that this event is so uncomfortable for me, and for many of us, is that Jesus does act in ways that seem violent – his expression of anger uses more than words. During the Festival of Passover when people were celebrating, Jesus showed up at the temple full of anger and zeal.

Jesus was human and he was angry. In his anger, he overturned tables, but he did not injure people; he did not do violence against other people. I guess the question is, when does righteous anger require more than words. Are there times when we might believe that we need to take actions that go beyond words? Even at those times, though are we able to express our anger in ways that do not do violence to another person?

John is the only gospel that places this event at a time other than during what we call Holy Week. John places this event near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and I think that is significant. In John’s gospel, Jesus doesn’t talk accuse the temple authorities of making the temple a den of

thieves but rather that they are turning the temple into a marketplace. In John's gospel, Jesus is asked what give him the right to question the temple and he makes the famous statement, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." It took 46 years to build the temple so Jesus statement that he would rebuild the temple in 3 days is absurd.

This was the only specific charge that was raised when Jesus was arrested. It makes sense that John would include and emphasize this. The actual temple was destroyed in in about 70 AD, about 35 years after Jesus death. John points out that Jesus was not referring to the physical temple in Jerusalem, but rather to his body, which was raised to life three days after his death.

For the early church, and especially for those after the temple was destroyed, it would have been comforting to think of Jesus body as the new temple. The scripture that Jesus refers to in John's gospel looks for a day when homes and life will be sacred. Amy-Jill Levine stresses that "They anticipate a time when all peoples, all nations, can worship in peace, and in love. There is no separation between home and house of worship, because the entire land lives in a sanctified state."^{vi}

At the meal we call the Last Supper, as Jesus breaks the bread and shares the cup of wine, he tells his followers that this is his body and blood given for us. John puts the temple event near the beginning of Jesus' ministry so that throughout the gospel, we understand that Jesus is the new temple for us; that he will give his body to his followers as a sign of the new covenant, as a means of reconciliation.^{vii}

Levine tells us that this means also^{viii} that if we take seriously the idea that when we gather as a community in Jesus name that we are his body on earth. As his body we must be a welcome place for all people. We

should ask ourselves if our community is this kind of welcome and safe place or is it a place where the robbers as Jesus identified them feel safe but where outsiders feel unwelcome or threatened.

Finally, Levine reminds us that we are also the temple of the Holy Spirit. So how do we take care of ourselves as a temple of the Holy Spirit? Do we care for our bodies? When we look at other people, do we recognize that they are also part of the temple of the Holy Spirit?

All of this may seem a little overwhelming and it is easy for us to think that we are falling short of what God wants us to be and do and then to become critical of ourselves. Last week I asked us to be compassionate with ourselves as we ask the tough questions of Lent.

One way that we can be compassionate with ourselves as individuals and as a congregation is to recall something that Vincent Van Gogh said, “Great things are done by a series of small things brought together.” God invites us to live our lives as faithful disciples one day at a time. Our actions may seem small at the time but together they can make a difference in the world and lead to great things done for Christ.

ⁱ Borg, Marcus & Crossan, John Dominic. The Last Week Kindle Loc 825

ⁱⁱ Ibid, Loc. 764 Note that Amy-Jill Levine also makes this point.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lettsome, Raquel St. Clair in Feasting on the Gospels, John 1. Kindle Loc 2028

^{iv} Thurman, Howard. Quoted in many different places.

^v Borg, Loc 904

^{vi} Levine, Amy-Jill. Entering The Passion of Jesus. P.59

^{vii} Ibid, P.62

^{viii} Ibid, P.62