3rd Sunday of Lent

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John 2: 13-22

Temples and other temporary structures

I am impressed by Temples. Cathedrals. Grand things that took people years to build. The attention to detail, the thoughtful architecture. The diligence that it took to build it. My kids bought me a 3D puzzle of Notre Dame for Christmas. I was stuck on step 4 for a few weeks before I began to make progress. This will be an exact replica of Notre Dame when I am finished. I don’t know how many of you are Ken Follett fans, but the novel the ***Pillars of the Earth,*** narrates the construction of a European cathedral that literally stretches across generations of construction workers and craftsmen. Some builders knew that if they placed the first brick on some of these building projects that it would most likely be their great-great-great-great grandson who put on the finishing touches. Things weren’t built to get it done quickly. They were built for grandeur. To make a statement. And I am impressed.

And I think I have reason to be impressed for these cathedrals are impressive. But often, we are impressed very often by all the wrong things.  In John 2 everyone was impressed with the physical Temple.  It had been undergoing construction for over four decades already and was not even finished.  This was Herod’s Temple. Maybe it did not quite hold a candle to the original splendor of Solomon’s Temple but that building was long gone, and Herod’s was no small wonder. The Temple in Jerusalem was something to behold.

The text begins with Jesus going to the Temple during Passover and making a whip of cords and driving the moneychangers out.

The Gospel text today is one of those texts that is often quoted as one that shows that Jesus became angry. Many preachers have used this text to talk about and show that Jesus became angry as demonstrated by his whip of cords and his turning over the money changers tables and driving them out of the Temple. And while I do think it is valid to point out and speak of Jesus’ anger and disappointment - if that becomes the complete focus of the sermon then I think the speaker has missed the main point that Jesus was trying to make in this discourse.

Some of you may be aware that Matthew, Mark and Luke are referred to as the Synoptic Gospels. They are referred to as the synoptic Gospels because they include many of the same stories, often in a similar sequence and in similar or sometimes identical wording.

They stand in contrast to John, whose content is largely distinct. For instance there are zero parables in John’s Gospel. The main purpose of John’s Gospel, as stated by John himself, is to show the Jesus of Nazareth was Christ, the Son of God, and that those who believe in him might have eternal life.

To the preacher, one of the first things you notice is that this temple scene is in a different location than the other temple scenes. Whereas in Matthew, Mark, and Luke the temple scene follows Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, in John the episode is immediately after Jesus’ first sign, the wedding at Cana.

The other Gospels use the phrase “den of thieves” to refer to the scene in the Temple with the moneychangers, John’s gospel doesn’t use that phrase.

Jesus’ reaction must have come as a shock. They were selling cattle, sheep, animals needed for sacrifice as required by law. People traveling to Jerusalem for Passover weren’t bringing their own animals with them - that was a hassle - they would need to buy an animal for sacrifice when they arrived. “without the shedding of blood, there can be no forgiveness of sins.” (Hebrews 9:22/ Leviticus 17:11) - so naturally people saw a need and began to meet that need. People began to sell animals that were needed for sacrifice.

The levels of meaning of the temple incident in John are also found in the details in how the incident is told.

The authorities essentially ask for some sort of proof that Jesus has the right to do what he just did and say what he just said. They ask for signs, recalling the wedding at Cana and foreshadowing the next six signs that Jesus will perform during his public ministry. The signs that Jesus performs are in and of themselves not revelatory of Jesus’ glory. Rather, they point to or indicate an aspect of who Jesus is that the believer needs to recognize.

Jesus enters the temple and finds what one would expect during a pilgrimage festival. The vital trades are in place for the necessary exchange of monies, animals, and grains for the required sacrifices. Nothing is out of order at this point. The narration happens in real time, as if the reader can see everything that Jesus sees. Jesus’ command to the dove sellers differs strikingly from the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48). Instead of a concern for temple malpractices (“den of robbers”), Jesus orders that his Father’s house not be made a marketplace. For the temple system to survive, however, the ordered transactions of a marketplace were essential. The temple had to function as a place of exchange for maintaining and supporting the sacrificial structures.

Jesus is not just upset about the mismanagement of the selling (which again, is not mentioned in this text) , but calls for a complete dismantling of the entire system.

Underneath this critique lies the intimation that the temple itself is not necessary. At the center of such theological statements is the fundamental question of God’s location, which will be confirmed in the dialogue between Jesus and the Jewish authorities.

John’s Gospel is not focused on just denigrating the economic activity at the time. John’s Gospel is developing Jesus as God’s authoritative Son. John uses the economic sphere of religious activity to develop his Christology and his views of who Christ is to his readers.

Temples were important. It was where people came to worship God. Cathedrals and churches are place to help center us and to focus our minds and hearts on God. They are places of worship - where communities can come together and learn and grow and worship together.

But Jesus was clearly beginning to teach a different way here. It is not just the Temple where God’s presence is going to be found. Your body - my body - His body was the Temple of God. God was embodied in Christ and God’s presence through the Holy Spirit was going to become embodied in each of us who believed on Him.

This is important to think about on different levels. We all have heard and know this on an intellectual level. But for us to embrace this fully and to fully understand that the Spirit of the Living God lives within each of us - how does that change how we live? How we view each other?

I suspect I won’t ever change my love of Cathedrals. Unfortunately Cathedral building has largely become a thing of the past. I can’t imagine the controversy that would be had if a religious organization chose to spend their money on the building of a cathedral that took hundreds of years to build because of its grandeur. We have become a people of such immediate gratification that I suspect that we would not tolerate spending our money on something that we won’t see the fruition of. That we would never see the bell placed in the final sphere. And I think that is a shame. Because these Cathedrals do point to the glory of God - of God’s grandeur and holiness. The smallness that you can feel in these holy places is theological - it can be a good reminder of our place in the world. Many churches have chosen to not even have buildings because the church is the body of Christ - in each of us. And while this is true - I think something can be lost when we forget God’s grandeur and our smallness compared to it.

The challenge for churches is to structure their economic activity in ways that reveal the divine to the world. When the world looks at how Christian institutions gain and use their economic resources, it should reflect who Christ is to the world.

The Jews in the temple that day wanted a sign that could explain why Jesus was doing this - a sign to show them who he was. He answered them, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up”. He was speaking of his body of which they did not fully understand - it was not until after he had been raised from the dead that his disciples remembered this conversation.

They believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

We have it a little easier, we can look back and reflect on the scripture, we weren’t experiencing it in real time.

The Epistle text today speaks of how the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

As we continue on in Lent - as we continue to reflect on the cross that we know is coming - as we think of the Temple that was and the temple that is now - our own bodies that embody the spirit of God - this season may appear to be foolishness to the world, but let us remember that to those of us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

“Jews demanded signs, and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified.” (1 Corinthians 1:18-25)

May your temple this day, reflect the God whom you worship.

Amen.