

3 March 2024

Zeal for Your House

John 2:13-22

Our Gospel reading today is from the Gospel of John, chapter 2, verses 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 market-place!' 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.

This is one of the few incidents in Jesus' life that is mentioned in all four gospels, but each one does it somewhat differently. In Mark, for instance, it is a rejection of temple corruption, calling it a "den of thieves" and quoting Isaiah 56, "My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations." Mark, the companion of Paul, wants to stress that the worship of God should be for everyone, not reserved for a few. Also in Mark, this riot takes place in the last week of Jesus' life and is the final straw for the priests and temple leaders: Jesus has to go. John, on the other hand, tells this story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, making it not the final straw but an opening statement of purpose. And in John's account, it's not a scripture from Isaiah that comes to the disciples' mind but Psalm 69:9, which says, "Zeal for your house shall consume me."

Let's pause to think about that for a moment. Does Jesus seem to you to be showing zeal for the temple? Imagine a stranger coming into church right now, overturning pews, breaking windows, and driving the ushers out the back door with a whip. If we asked that man, "Why are you doing this?" and he said, "Because I love the church so much," what would you think? How is tearing something up and causing a disturbance "zeal for God's house"?

Hold on to that question, but let's move on, because there's another unique element in John's account. The priests ask Jesus, "What sign do you have? Prove to us that you have authority to do this!" And Jesus replies, "Tear this temple down, and in three days I'll rebuild it." The priests have no idea what he's talking about, which is reasonable. It sounds like nonsense. How could he rebuild that temple in three days? It's been under construction for almost half a century and still isn't done. (I think I've used the same contractor.) But by the time this gospel was written things had changed, and John's original readers knew exactly what Jesus meant, because by that time the temple had, in fact, been torn down by the Romans and had not been rebuilt. John's readers knew that Jesus wasn't talking about the brick and mortar temple. They were understood the second part of Jesus' speech: "I will raise it in three days." Hmm. Raised up in three days. I've heard of that somewhere. To John's readers, this was clear: Jesus wasn't

talking about that temple: he was talking about a new kind of worship, one that is not based on a physical location but on a physical resurrection, not located in one site but appearing wherever the Spirit blew, not bound to one nation but open to all people.

This was, in fact, what happened. Christianity had come out of Judaism and even up to the time that the temple was destroyed, most people in the Roman Empire assumed that it was just another sect of the Jewish faith. But the new group had already begun to distinguish itself from its parent religion, and after the destruction of Jerusalem that distinction was sealed. The temple had been demolished, the institutions dismantled, and the leadership hierarchy scattered into exile along with everyone else. Institutional Judaism was gone. The Jewish faith did not die out, but it retreated into small groups in exile, meeting in homes and local gatherings called synagogues, quietly hunkering down with their own people so as to maintain their traditions even without a temple. But the other offspring of the Jewish faith, the Christians, did the opposite: they opened their doors and welcomed Samaritans and Gentiles and slaves and women into their gatherings as equals. They sent apostles out into Asia and Europe and Northern Africa to tell new people about their risen savior, starting local gatherings called churches in every land that they could get to.

From the perspective of the early Christians reading this in John, this wasn't about Jesus' attempt to reform Judaism. This was about the changing of the guard. The religion of Abraham and Moses had grown old and rigid, too stiff to adapt to a new world, too blind to perceive God's new work, too deaf to hear God speaking again, too rotten with internal corruption to survive. That old institutional form of temple Judaism lay in ruins and was being replaced by a new faith, to which God had spoken anew, declaring a new covenant that was open to everyone. This new religion would not be tied to any single temple or set of sacrificial rules or hereditary priesthood; it would worship the risen Christ in Spirit and in truth.

As I outlined this sermon in my office this week, I looked at my bookshelf and jotted down these titles of books I've read in the past few years: *The End of White Christian America*; *A Church Dismantled: A Kingdom Restored*; *Re-Organized Religion: The Reshaping of the American Church and Why It Matters*; *The Great De-Churching*; *Everything Must Change*; and *Losing Our Religion*. The astute among you might have noticed a common theme running through those titles. Many today feel that the western church, as we know it, is heading for the 1st century temple's fate. Our institutions – our boards, agencies, seminaries, denominational structures – are all on a short-term lease, they say, and even our large, impressive individual churches are declining and will soon follow them into the dustheap of history. People say this for a lot of reasons. Some of those reasons have to do with changes in society: demographic shifts, falling birth rates, growing distrust of institutions in general, and so on. But many also point out that churches have done much of it to ourselves: scandals and their cover-ups, historical and continuing racism, institutional arrogance, greed, and ethical compromise for the sake of power. Some of these books not only say that the church is about to collapse but that it's high time. Our current church needs to die, so that the next one can rise in its place. It's God's will. Jesus is overturning the tables and driving the moneychangers out as we speak.

I don't go that far, and to be fair, most of the books don't either. Not every church is corrupt. Not every church has lost its way. Reports of our death are being greatly exaggerated. As I noted above, many 1st century Christians believed that God had turned away from Judaism to Christianity, and that Judaism was doomed. But that didn't turn out to be the case, did it? Jewish believers continue holding to their covenant with the God of Abraham and Moses, as they

have for thousands of years. Just because a new world is coming does not mean the previous world must die.

But a new world is coming. The church *is* changing dramatically. Christianity is no longer a white European religion. I mean, it never was, but for a while it looked like it. Not any more. The center of our faith has shifted to Africa, Asia, and Latin American. I read that there are more Lutherans in Africa than in Europe and the US combined. Even here in the US, the church is changing hue. Among the few churches that are actually growing, most are immigrant churches. About 40% of Wisconsin's United Methodist pastors were born in other countries – Korea, the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, various African nations. (Remember when we used to *send* missionaries?) Moreover, our larger church structures, like the Jerusalem temple in Jesus' day, cannot last indefinitely. Our denominational apparatus was built up during a time of great plenty, but we can't afford it anymore. We can no longer maintain ourselves in the style to which we have become accustomed. The church in 40 years will look very different than it does now.

But here's the second thing I want to say: none of this changes anything for us. Our task as a church has never changed and never will. Yes, there will be some ways in which church life will be less comfortable, and that's sad, but as I mentioned last week, comfort was not one of the things that Jesus promised his disciples. What he said was that we were to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, and befriend the lonely. What he said was that we were to be his witnesses – flesh and blood examples of his self-giving love – in our hometown, in our county, in the next state, and in the entire world. And how are we supposed to do that? The same way the apostles did: we will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon us.

That day in Jerusalem when Jesus flipped his wig and a few moneychangers' tables in the temple, he knew that that temple would soon be destroyed. All temples are eventually. But he hinted to the people that there was going to be a new kind of temple, a new sort of church, inaugurated by his resurrection. That was how the man vandalizing the temple could be described as having "zeal for God's house." He was talking about the church behind the structures, not the structures themselves. And that underlying church is in good hands. We don't need to worry about the church; we just need to be the church. We don't need to respond to the demographics and church statistical reports by frantically trying new programs to save the church. It is not our job to save the church. That's the job of the Holy Spirit, and she doesn't need our help. It's not our job to save the church; it's our job to make the church worth saving.

Let us pray:

God, thank you for Christmas. I love the lights that decorate the early darkness, trees that show through other people's lighted windows, the rediscovery of cheerful music and hopeful stories, the sudden stirrings of charity in even the Scroogiest of hearts.

I know that's not what Christmas is about, that all that is fluff for a season, but it's not a bad thing either, so thank you.

God, thank you for books and movies. I love losing myself in the stories, love being frightened at imaginary terrors from the safety of my upholstered chair, love having villains to truly and unashamedly despise, love being brought to tears by the nobility of people who don't exist and never did.

I know they aren't real, that in the world I live in, all the loose ends are never tied up so neatly and that heroes are never really heroes and that hatred is never the best response, but the stories hint at a time when all might be made well, so thank you.

God, thank you for the church. I love its music and the artificial orderliness of its ritual. I love the stale jokes that every church tells about pot lucks and Jello salads and long sermons. I even love the big church gatherings where people cluster to talk in acronyms that only they understand and brood seriously over matters that no one outside their tribe cares about – like the world's most oblivious Trekkie Convention.

I know it's not real, God. I know that all these church structures are games that we play on the surface of something that actually matters, temporary shacks built on the future site of a magnificent palace, but it's usually harmless, and until the palace is built, it's what we have, so thank you. Amen.