

Message for February 28, 2021

Walk through Holy Week 2

John 2.13-21

Jesus Clears the Temple

Anger is a funny thing.

It seems like we live in a society that is incredibly ambivalent about anger.

There are certain kinds of anger that are deemed acceptable: road rage, twitter rants, political disagreements, cancel culture.

It seems like the news cycle, our social media, everything is crafted and curated to keep us in a near constant state of outrage. That is most certainly exhausting, if not unhelpful. There is an expectation that we are to be offended. If we're not, we're not paying attention. The issue that I have is that all of these acceptable reasons for being angry, they are isolated. Road rage, online feuds, none of that stuff requires us to engage with one another, to be in relationship.

One of the most healing things that I can say/hear in a strained relationship is "I am angry." Then, we can get somewhere. We can work toward real reconciliation, making things right, being at one again. When kids process their anger there is this idea of helping them get from "mad to sad." The idea is that the initial reaction might look like anger, often in the form of an outburst, there is likely another feeling underlying that - disappointment, frustration... feelings that are harder to name and therefore address.

What are the things that make you angry?

Angry enough to make a scene?

That's what Jesus does in our Scripture today. Not long after we have been singing about a sweet baby Jesus who *doesn't even cry* we have this loud, angry Jesus, causing a disruption in this incident known as the Clearing of the Temple. Now, in the movie and television depictions of this event, maybe even in our mind's eye, we might see Jesus as so angry as to be violent. Indeed, to come up with a cord of whips, to fashion a weapon,

would require a certain kind of rage. We picture the hubbub, the action, interrupted by Jesus and his chaos, the tables and their wares crashing to the ground, the stunned silence that follows. But how much of a commotion did he really cause?

The first thing we need to keep in mind is that the Temple complex was enormous - the size of 12 soccer fields put end to end. It was still under construction, with several courts. The inner sanctum was the Holy of Holies, entered only by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, to pray for himself and the people. Outside of that, the court of the Priests, then the Court of Israel, the Court of the Women, then the Court of the Gentiles. There was a place for everyone, it truly was a House of Prayer for All Nations.

But that House of Prayer was very different from what we recognize as church. It was a gathering place, a tourist attraction, especially during the pilgrimage festivals. It was very crowded, and it was noisy. The noise was loud and boisterous, and because it was Passover, people were happy because they were celebrating the Feast of Freedom. For many, it was one of the few opportunities to celebrate by eating meat rather than just fish. We might think of the setting as a type of vacation for the pilgrims: a chance to leave their homes, to catch up with friends and relatives, to see the “big city,” and to feel a special connection with their fellow Jews and with God.¹

Now imagine Jesus showing up full of anger and zeal. Yes, he caused a scene, but honestly, the ripples of his actions likely wouldn't have gone very far past the immediate surrounding area. The noise and action would have swallowed up anything he said or did.

Amy-Jill Levine suggests that Jesus's gesture is symbolic rather than practical. This isn't about what was happening in the Temple. It's not about any commerce or corruption that was happening, nor is it about the requirements and rituals of worship. Then what is it about?

¹ Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week by Amy-Jill Levine (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2018) pages 48-50.

In the other Gospel accounts of this story, Jesus asks: *Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"?* It's pretty important to note that this is a rhetorical question. The answer is yes. The temple is a place for all the people. There are courts where all are welcome to gather and do business and worship. It should be likewise with church. We often speak of welcome, but now Jesus is pushing us to do more. To examine how we make space for others in our worship and work.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus then goes on to say: *But you have made it a den of robbers.* This isn't the place that the robbing is happening. A den isn't where robbers go to engage in thievery. It's where they retreat after, with their loot. Is this what church is for us? Possibly. If it is, I'm kind of ok with it. One of my mentors on my internship had this reply when someone said that they didn't go to church because it was full of hypocrites. She would say "of course! Where else would we be?" The point is, that we need to take this sanctuary seriously. Church should be our safe place, our retreat, yes. But also the thing that shores us up to take risks. It should be a place of promise, where we make a commitment to a godly way of life, and where we live up to those promises.

John puts a bit of a different spin on this, telling us: *Stop turning God's house into a market!* I agree that it does seem to be disparaging the Temple economy, but that's not the point. Jesus is looking to a future when even a marketplace is as holy as the temple. He is envisioning a time when the temple is no longer needed because every place is so sacred. The question implied is: Can our homes be as sanctified, as filled with worship? Do we do our best for this hour on Sunday morning and then go back to business as usual for the rest of the week?

With so much at stake, "business-as-usual" seems ridiculous. As Prof. Allie Utley points out, the routine nature of our everyday lives sometimes seems ludicrous in the face of such suffering around the world. Perhaps we might consider Jesus' actions in the Temple. Maybe it wasn't this huge scene that we envision. Maybe people outside of the immediate area hardly even noticed. But we noticed. We might have started small and seemingly insignificant has become a movement that has spanned millenia. We sit here

today, connecting in community online because one person risked righteous anger. He asked us to reevaluate what is worth not only our outrage, but our action. He showed us what it takes.