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John 2:13-22

In the Wilderness: Why?

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John 2:13-22 New Revised Standard Version

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

The picture of Jesus we hold in our minds and in our hearts is really hard to shake. It is normal to create Jesus in our own image. Upstairs at Greenland Hills there used to be a Jesus room. I never experienced the Jesus room myself, but I have been told that there were an assortment of depictions of Jesus. Here is one that remains. This depiction of Jesus was painted by William Sallman in 1940 and Jesus looks very peaceful and passive. The Jesus that I see in this picture is very different than the Jesus in our scripture today.

This is the cleansing of the temple story and it is the only violent act of Jesus that is recorded in the gospels. It is in all four gospels, but in Matthew, Mark and Luke it happens right after the Palm parade. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus’ public act of cleansing the temple directly leads to his death. In John’s gospel the cleaning of the temple happens at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, right after Jesus changes water into wine at the wedding of Cana. In John’s gospel it is the raising of Lazarus from the dead that leads to Jesus’ death because John is filled with symbolism and life and death are pretty powerful symbols.

In this story Jesus joins the 300,000 people who had gone to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Jesus sees people selling animals to the pilgrims who had traveled to Jerusalem and needed animals to make sacrifices at the temple. The money changers helped people to have temple money so they could buy one of those animals. You couldn’t buy a sacrifice with a coin that had a heathen image on it. All of these things are normal as they are how the temple has always worked. Sure, people would take advantage of the pilgrims. This was a seller’s market after all. Jesus gets angry, makes a whip, and throws everyone and everything out of the temple. Jesus is throwing furniture and shouting and flinging money into the air.

By throwing out the moneychangers and the animals, Jesus challenges established practices and authority. That usually does not go well. We don’t know what drove Jesus over the edge. Was it the commercial activity happening in the temple? Was it the transactions the pilgrims had to do to fulfill their religious obligations? Was it the money changers who were taking advantage of people by taking a cut for themselves? Was it exploitation or greed? We don’t know and Jesus doesn’t help explain things. When asked to explain himself, Jesus talks about destroying the temple and raising it up in three days. The writer of John’s gospel tries to explain Jesus’ words that he was talking about the temple of the body being resurrected. It drives me crazy that Jesus doesn’t answer questions in a clear way. I have a lot of questions for God that I want explained.

I appreciate the question that Jesus is asked, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” The people want to know why. Why should they listen to Jesus? Who made him the big cheese? He seems just like a country boy from Galilee. Still today we don’t get what Jesus is all about and since the very beginning Christians have not done the best job sharing the good news and living out faith in love. We don’t understand God’s freely given amazing grace and mercy. We don’t trust it. So, we demand signs. We want control, we want power, and we ignore the truth of God’s amazing grace.

This Lent I have been thinking about what I can do to draw closer to God. What can I do in my daily life to feel more connected to God? How can I wake up and say, “Dear God, it is morning!” instead of “Dear god, it is morning.” I am realizing that I need to ask why a lot in my day. Why am I doing this? Does it serve a purpose? Does it draw me closer to God? I had a friend who for one year tried to say “yes” to everything that was asked of her. Will you serve on this committee? Yes. Will you help with this project? Yes. Will you bring donuts? Yes. This Lent when I am asked to do something I am trying to ask myself why. Why am I doing this? Does it serve a purpose? Does it draw me closer to God? The story of Jesus cleaning the temple teaches me that I don’t want to do everything like it has been done before. I want to keep asking why.

Why do we come to worship? Why do we do the things that we do? Jesus welcomed the beggars and hugged the lepers, and drove out the dove sellers and moneychangers from the temple. We get it backwards today. We shun the downtrodden, the sick, and the poor and we welcome the wealthy and the commercial interests. Did anyone see the Simpsons episode where the church is in dire need of money so they get an electronic sign for the pulpit and during the sermon different businesses advertise?

Now anytime anyone starts talking about money, they are getting into meddling. Jesus is getting into our business because sellers do not exist without buyers, and most of us are buyers. Why do you spend your money where you do? Consumerism is in the air that we breathe. It is easier to let Jesus into our hearts than into our wallets. Do you remember one of the Big 10 about not coveting, not wanting what other people have? How can we be grateful for our lives instead of wanting what everyone else has?

What we spend our money on shows us what is important in our lives. How can our bank accounts and our church budgets show the gospel? This church is passionate about serving others. You only have to think about the Global Village Market where in the past eleven years over $313,000 has been given to 29 different non-profits, our youth, our Mission and Social Justice Committee and our missions supported by the greater United Methodist Church. Generosity changes us. We were created to be generous and our generosity can be a great blessing in our lives.

The story of Jesus cleaning the temple invites me to look at what I am doing that draws me away from God. What practices are we doing that draw us away from God? What are I doing that draws me away from my family? What are I doing that draws me away from church? It reminds me of when people find out I am a pastor and they apologize for cussing. How can we be more authentic in our lives? We don’t want to live behind a mask, and I hope that we all use this time of Lent as a time of interior renewal.

Being in this place with all of you sustains me in the journey of my Christian life. Sharing in the bread and the cup gives me great joy. It helps me to remember that the why for me is about sharing. It is about receiving the blessing of God and sharing that blessing with others. I have one life to live and I want my life to be about generosity, about kindness, about openness and learning from others. As we worship together I know the why for me is because of Jesus. Jesus who gets angry when he sees people being cheated. Jesus who gets angry when he sees people doing what they have always done and not thinking about the why. We worship together today as a family of faith to draw closer to God and to one another. Thanks be to God, Amen.