

THE TEMPLE OF JESUS

John 2:13-25

Third Sunday in Lent (Series B)

March 3, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND
Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 2, verses 13 through 25. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 2, beginning at verse 13, we read in Jesus' name.

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. ¹⁵ And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ And he told those who sold the pigeons, “Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade.” ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

¹⁸ So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰ The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. ²² When therefore 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.

²³ Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵ and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Have you ever heard someone say, “If Jesus were around today, he would” ... fill in the blank. Maybe you've said it. “If Jesus were around today, he would ... say this or do that.” Usually it's something social or political, like feed the poor, heal the sick, befriend the outcasts, etc.

We like to do this with significant historical persons. If Martin Luther were alive today, what would he make of the churches that bear his name? What would he think of our little congregation? Or if Martin Luther King, Jr. were alive today—totally different person; they're not related at all, though the one is named after the other—what would Dr. King make of the civil rights movement that followed him? It's difficult and dangerous to do this with historical persons, because we don't really know what they would say or do. All we have is what they did say and do at their time in history.

It's even more dangerous to do this with Jesus, because, with other historical persons, like Martin Luther, we can recognize that they were children of their times. They had flaws. We don't have to hold them up as perfect. So we can evaluate them more honestly. But with Jesus,

especially when we confess that he is the Son of God, we feel compelled to present him as perfect. This means that we project him as saying or doing whatever we think he should say or do, instead of what he actually would say or do. We do this with God. We recreate him in our image. If we think we are right about something, and we always do think that, we assume that God must think the same thing. Nobody ever says, "Oh, I think hunting is wrong, but I know God thinks it's okay." No. If we think something is right or wrong, we assume God must feel the same way. That is, if we think God is right. So whenever we say, "If Jesus were around today, he would ... say this or do that," we're really just saying what we think he should say or do.

The other problem with saying that is that we assume Jesus isn't around today. But he is. He promised to be with us always. He is here among us right now. So if we say, "I think Jesus would do this or say that," there's nothing stopping him from actually doing it. If he wanted to appear in physical flesh and say or do whatever we think he should, he could. But he's not doing it, at least not in a way that we can see.

So if you want to know Jesus, don't bother trying to guess what he would do or say. Instead, look at what he did actually do, and listen to what he did actually say. Sometimes it will surprise.

This passage should be a little bit of a shock to remind us of this, because whatever we expect Jesus to do, whipping people and animals in the temple and flipping over tables would probably not be on our list. But he did.

He actually did it more than once. John records it here at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, right after he changed water into wine, which was his first sign. But the other gospels record Jesus doing the same thing at the very end of his ministry, right after he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-46). The liberal Bible scholars try to point this out as an error in the gospels, as if they can't agree on when Jesus did this. The obvious solution is that he did it more than once. Maybe it was a Passover tradition for him. I don't know. We just have these two instances recorded, once at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and again three years later, just a few days before his crucifixion. And why not? If he drove them out once before, and then they come back, why not drive them out again three years later. If Jesus was upset about it the first time, shouldn't he be upset about it again? It's still his Father's house, which means it's also his house. If someone tries to rob your house, and you drive them away, would you let them rob your house if they come back a second time? Of course not. Haven't you ever seen Home Alone? If you protect your house, you're going to keep protecting it. That's what Jesus is doing here.

So this is the first time that Jesus drives the moneychangers out of his house. And we see from this what Jesus really cares about. Often times, it's the things that make us mad that reveal what we're really passionate about. And that's what happens to Jesus here.

Now, when I say that he was mad, I don't mean that he was out of control. It's not a tantrum like we might have. God has emotions. Jesus has emotions. But he is not ruled by them. He's in control of what he's doing. Jesus' aggressive and even violent behavior here does not justify our unrighteous outbursts. But we do see here what Jesus really cares about. He cares about his temple. And if we do more than just watch what he does, but also listen to what he says, we will learn something about his temple.

There were merchants in the temple selling various animals for sacrifices: oxen, sheep, and pigeons. These were the common animals that people needed for sacrifices. The people of Israel were required to make sacrifices for various sins or even just life events, like having a baby. So it

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kind of seems like a neat service to have these animals available for sale there. You didn't have to buy a sheep in Galilee and then walk it all the way to Jerusalem. It saved some hassle. So it was convenient to have them for sale at the temple.

But it doesn't seem like the merchants were doing this out of the goodness of their hearts. I imagine the prices at the temple were probably a bit higher than if you went to the local farmer's market. Business is all about location. It's kind of like when you go to a baseball game, and they won't let you bring your own food in, but they'll gladly sell you a hotdog for nine dollars. It almost makes you want to flip over the hotdog cart.

So the merchants were probably taking advantage of the travelers, and they were certainly using the sacred worship of the temple as a means for greedy financial gain. This is what drove Jesus mad, and this is why Jesus drove the merchants and their animals out of the temple.

And I kind of wonder what the ordinary people thought. They still needed to make a sacrifice. If they just walked down from Galilee, hoping to buy a sheep at the temple, they were in big trouble. "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb. 9:22). Jesus didn't just ruin the merchants' day; he disrupted the entire worship of the temple. He prevented the sacrifices from happening, along with the forgiveness they promised. But Jesus had a plan for that, so he drove the merchants away.

And there were money changers there too. There was a yearly temple tax, which the Jews had to pay for the upkeep of the temple (Ex. 30:13). The tax itself wasn't the problem. Jesus was okay with taxes. The money changers were the problem. The tax had to be a certain coin: a half shekel. And it couldn't have the image of Caesar on it either. That would have been considered a violation of the First Commandment. But many of the Jews who travelled to Jerusalem didn't live in places where the right coin was readily available, so for the convenience of all the travelers, there were bankers at the temple who would gladly exchange your money ... for a price of course. And this was the problem. Greedy bankers and merchants were turning Jesus' house into a house of trade.

Kind of like Charlie Brown in that Christmas special, it's all the commercialism that drove Jesus mad. So we see a side of Jesus that doesn't make it into the caricature. If you want a Jesus who's just kind of an "aww shucks" nice guy, then I have bad news for you: The real Jesus isn't that guy. But if you think Jesus meek and mild is kind of boring, then I have good news for you: Jesus is way more interesting than that. He has no reservations about offending people. He's not even worried about offending the wrong people. Sometimes, he wants to. But he's not always harsh. Jesus does not treat all people equally. To the broken hearted and downtrodden, Jesus is consistently gentle. To those who are burdened by the weight of sin or victimized by some other kind of oppressor, Jesus is merciful. But to the victimizers, the proud, or those who just enjoy their sins, Jesus is offensive and wild. He says and does things that we generally don't consider to be very pious.

There's a reason for Jesus doing this in the temple. It's not just a fit of rage where he can't believe someone would do this in his house. He's defending his house, but not for selfish reasons. The temple is the place where God promised to meet with his people. Jesus is defending his house for the benefit of the people he has invited there. He was demonstrating that the temple belonged to him. And, more importantly, he would go on to teach that that temple was passing away, but he was building a new temple.

The rulers of the temple were thinking, *Who does this guy think he is, coming in here, flipping over tables and cracking whips?* But Jesus told them exactly who he thinks he is when

he said, **“Do not make my Father’s house a house of trade”** (2:16). And notice this: he didn’t refer to God as *“Our Father,”* like he taught us to do in the Lord’s Prayer. He referred to God as *his* Father, as if Jesus is the only Son of God. Therefore, this temple belongs to him.

So the Jews wanted some proof, because that’s a pretty bold claim. They said, *“What sign do you show us for doing these things?”* (2:18). The idea is, *Okay, if you’re going to flip tables, crack whips, and claim to be the Son of God, you’re going to have to provide some justification for your actions and words.*

So Jesus offers them a sign: **“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”** (2:19). And this statement is really the key to the whole text, even though no one there had any idea what in the world Jesus was talking about, at least not yet. So this, along with the whole Son of God thing, is what Jesus said that made him sound mad in the brain cells.

From the perspective of the Jews, this was just plain nuts. It had taken forty-six years to build that temple, and the work was still ongoing.

The building they were standing in is what we refer to as Herod’s temple. Herod began renovation of the Second Temple around 20 BC. And this was really the third attempt to build a temple that would stand the test of time. The first temple—King Solomon’s temple—was built around 960 BC, and it stood until 586 BC when it was destroyed by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. Then, when the Jews returned from their captivity in Babylon, they rebuilt the temple. This Second Temple was completed around 516 BC, but it apparently wasn’t that great (Hag. 2:3). So several centuries later, King Herod began a major renovation of it, which basically involved rebuilding the whole thing one stone at a time. And this was the temple Jesus was standing in when he said, **“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”**

Later, when Jesus was on trial, his accusers twisted these words to paint Jesus as a rebel, saying that *he* would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days (Matt. 26:61).

But Jesus never said *he* would destroy the temple. What he actually said was that *these Jews* would destroy the temple. Now this is just crazy. This would be like someone telling us that we’re going to burn down our own church in hate. That’s just ridiculous. And not only that, but this lunatic is going to rebuild it *by himself* in three days. That’s what the Jews heard. This crazy guy in temple was telling them that they were going to destroy the temple, and he was going to rebuild it in three days. This guy must be mad in the head.

But he wasn’t. Jesus knew exactly what he was talking about. Everything he said came to pass. But here’s the thing: Jesus was the only person who knew what he was talking about. His disciples understood later, after these things came to pass. But at the time, Jesus was the only person who knew what Jesus was talking about.

Jesus was not talking about Herod’s temple. He was not talking about some temple that would go through cycle after cycle of being built, destroyed, rebuilt, run down, rebuilt, and destroyed again. Jesus was talking about a temple that would be destroyed, rebuilt in three days, and then live forever without destruction or decay. He was talking about the temple of his own body. This was the temple that these Jews, who thought they were zealous for the temple, would murder. But Jesus would rebuild it in his resurrection from the dead on the third day. And by this he would accomplish salvation for the entire world and establish a temple where all people of all nations and tribes and languages would have access to the one true God.

So I hope you see how crazy this sounded to the Jews, but I hope you also see that it was all true, down to the letter. The whole thing about them destroying their own temple, and the whole thing about Jesus rebuilding it: it was all true, and it all came to pass.

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The ultimate sign that would reveal Jesus as the Son of God was his resurrection from the dead. He would allow his countrymen to hand him over to the Romans. The temple of his body, in which the whole fullness of God dwelt, was destroyed, and it was rebuilt on the third day.

This is his sign. This is his proof that he is who he says he is. These Jews will kill him, and he will rise again from the dead. And perhaps the most amazing thing is that he doesn't come back from the dead to exact vengeance. He comes back from the dead as a temple through whom all who trust in him, even those who murdered him, will have free and safe and peaceful access to God the Father.

Jesus is your access to the Father. That's what the temple idea was all about. The temple was the place where God dwelt among his people. But now God has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the temple, and through him we have access to the Father. But access to the Father doesn't really help anything if we are condemned on account of our sin. So Jesus is also the sacrifice. Instead of making a sacrifice in the building of the temple, the true temple, Jesus Christ, is sacrificed once for all, for all the sins of the world. Through this temple we have access, and not just any kind of access, we have peaceful access to God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.