

Raise Up
Sunday, March 3, 2024
John 2:13-23
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Jesus' presence in the temple stirs up emotions while also inviting those present to see the presence of God in a new way.

Jesus' rampage through the temple is confusing and even unsettling. His rage seems to come up out of the blue. The story of Jesus' first miracle in John has come just a few lines earlier. He and his disciples become the hit of the wedding party when he quietly changes water into wine. Not just a couple of bottles of two-buck Chuck from Trader Joes wine, either. Jesus' miracle is one of astonishing, joyful abundance. It all comes as a sign, a reminder of God's glory that was now abiding in the world in human flesh. As one who is about to be the father of the bride times two, I'm hoping to figure out how he did that.

Understanding what happens next requires that we remember that John is telling us a story of incarnation, of God dwelling in flesh. "And the word became and stayed for a little while among us," says one translation of John 1:14. Note that the word is flesh, not "human." It's important: God comes to dwell in the way we exist, not just teleporting into the body of a human.

Remember that as he watch Jesus' rage unfold in the temple. The pace and tone of the story changes quickly. Without any introduction or background, John moves Jesus and the disciples into Jerusalem, at the time of the Passover. Nothing more is said, indeed, nothing about this scene seems to be unusual. The temple would be especially busy at the Passover, filled with pilgrims from across Israel. We know how that is: at Christmas and Easter, attendance builds. People come back. A friend of mine who is a rabbi told me that his synagogue in Creve Coeur was constructed so that its seating arrangement could expand to five times its primary capacity for one week each year.

This is what happens: the holiday is approaching, and the temple would be crowded. It would be busy with people exchanging Roman currency for temple money, while others lined up to purchase animals for sacrifices. None of this was unusual, or even unlawful. It was simply how things were done.

It was a busy place. In Jesus' eyes, it was busy, but not in the ways that raise people to new life.

In one church I served, whenever one of the fellowship groups was planning an event, one of its members would be tasked with collecting money from people when they made reservations. This group lived and died by a simple motto: Jesus welcomes everyone, but if you're coming to our event you got to pay first. It became a joke among the group members, such that every time Dolores would set up a table in the narthex her friends would tease her about Jesus chasing the money changers out of the temple.

While she was able to deal with the constant teasing, I could only imagine the effect their jokes would have had with members of the youth group collecting for spaghetti dinners or mission trips, let alone the wide-eyed Girl Scouts who just wanted to sell Thin Mints. They certainly did not want to unleash the wrath of Jesus.

Preaching professor Barbara Lundblad says that Jesus turning over the tables in the temple is not about ridding the church of Bingo games, nor is it about overturning the tables where the church collects money for donuts, dinners, or mission. You realize, don't you, that if Jesus were to return, he would certainly include donuts in a miracle? Nor is this story about replacing the Jewish faith with Christian symbols, as has happened far too often. Remember that those reading these words originally were Jewish believers who had come to understand that Jesus was the indeed the Messiah, the Lamb of God for whom they had long awaited.

This is a story of being raised up. Remember that for John, Jesus is God with flesh. In Jesus, God has come to abide with us. John's story is not a linear progression to the cross and resurrection, but is instead an ever curving, intricately woven story. At the end of the Gospel, John reminds us of his purpose: these signs are recorded so that you might believe Jesus is the Messiah, and having believed, find life in Jesus.

This is a story about resurrection—which, John tells us, is exactly how the disciples began to see it after Jesus was raised from the dead.

Scholars call this story "the incident in the temple," sort of like the way a teacher might report a fight on the playground. It's unique because each of the four gospels includes this story. But you may recall that in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus clears out the temple at the end of his ministry. In those gospels, Jesus turns over the tables and sends the critters

flying just days before he is arrested. Those watching take note of what he was doing, writing it down in their notebooks to make a case against Jesus.

John, however, puts this story at the front end of his Gospel. Its purpose here is different. In John's Gospel, there are three Passovers which Jesus attends. For John, the event that launches the investigation into Jesus is not his clearing out the temple, but the raising of Lazarus.

So, what does this story mean for us?

Is it meant to call us to protest economic abuse? Is it a call for us to demonstrate righteous anger as Jesus did, turning over tables of modern-day money changers? Is it a call for us to leave church, get into our cars and storm the local payday loan offices where the poor are charged exorbitant interest rates?

That might be one way to attract attention.

Or perhaps it is a call for us to understand that the gift of resurrection is a promise that will shake up our lives. Those watching Jesus were probably wondering, "Who is going to clean up this mess?" It was only after his death, John reminds us, that the disciples remembered and believed.

John offers us a reminder of God's presence with us. Jesus, the Word made flesh, comes and stands with God's people. The temple, naturally, was that place where people went to meet God. It was a place of worship, a place of sacred encounter. Indeed, like our sanctuary, it was a place where the faithful came expecting an encounter with God, a place where the holy mingles with the ordinary.

The surprise here is that Jesus tells the authorities that even if the temple was destroyed, he would raise it up. It seems impossible. Could it be possible that the temple, which has been under construction for 46 years, could be rebuilt in three days? You couldn't even get an insurance claim filed in three days.

"But he was speaking of the temple of his body."

Those who read these words originally would remember not only Jesus' death and resurrection, but also the very real destruction of the Temple. They were Jews pushed from their homelands. They have experienced the trauma of dislocation, of being tossed out of their homes and synagogues. They are witnesses to destruction.

And Jesus reminds them: I will be present with you.

Lately I've been pondering the importance of a ministry of presence. I stood outside the home of a police officer who, tragically, took his own life when the world seemed so confusing. His family, friends, and colleagues were filled with pain and trauma. They were scared. I had no words to offer...so I offered my presence.

Jesus' words break down systems that no longer work so that we could be raised to new life. In her book *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*; Kate Bowler writes of her own diagnosis of stage IV cancer. Facing death, Bowler explores how she encountered the presence of God through those who stood by her. Even those who offered no words helped convey an inexplicable strength to her. It is a picture of what the church, in Jesus' name, does best. Her friends and colleagues came "in like priests and mirrored back to me the face of Jesus. When they sat beside me, my hand in their hands, my own suffering began to feel like it had revealed to me the suffering of others, a world of those, who like me, are stumbling in the debris of dreams that thought they were entitled to and plans they didn't realize they had made."

This is our call: to mirror the presence of Jesus, who offers us resurrection.

Of course, Jesus was mad. Of course, he was incensed by those who trampled on the poor. Of course he upset the status quo. He came to offer the promise of life, to stand with all who seek to be raised. Amen.