

There's Your Sign

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Epiphany 4
John 2.13-25

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It was nearly time for the Jewish Passover, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 He found in the temple those who were selling cattle, sheep, and doves, as well as those involved in exchanging currency sitting there. 15 He made a whip from ropes and chased them all out of the temple, including the cattle and the sheep. He scattered the coins and overturned the tables of those who exchanged currency. 16 He said to the dove sellers, "Get these things out of here! Don't make my Father's house a place of business." 17 His disciples remembered that it is written, Passion for your house consumes me.

18 Then the Jewish leaders asked him, "By what authority are you doing these things? What miraculous sign will you show us?"

19 Jesus answered, "Destroy this temple and in three days I'll raise it up."

20 The Jewish leaders replied, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?" 21 But the temple Jesus was talking about was his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

23 While Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Passover Festival, many believed in his name because they saw the miraculous signs that he did. 24 But Jesus didn't trust himself to them because he knew all people. 25 He didn't need anyone to tell him about human nature, for he knew what human nature was.

Let us pray: Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your holy spirit, that as the scriptures are read and your word proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

We're going to be digging into the Gospel of John through Easter this year and it's important to keep a few broad themes in our minds when we encounter the individual stories. John's gospel is beloved for some it's stories and of course John 3:16, which we talk about next week; Jesus encounter with Mary; the raising of Lazarus. But John is a difficult gospel to understand – it's the most complex and sometimes the most troubling. So we want to stay grounded in John's perspective, but also bring a critical eye to the stories.

We think we know this story – the cleansing of the temple - and we do, but it is important that we look at the story as the 4th gospel presents it, rather than assume it's just like the other gospel accounts. And especially look at how it is different here from the others, because it **is** different. Those differences give us insight into the purpose of the gospel of John, its community and its context.

In the opening scenes of the 4th gospel Jesus doesn't say much. And when he does speak it is often fairly elusive. It is his actions, then, that constitute his teaching in these stories...and his actions provoke strong responses. According to this gospel's account, the "cleansing of the temple" as it's come to be known, is the first public event of Jesus ministry. Remember at the wedding in Cana only his mother and the disciples knew that Jesus was responsible for the water turning into wine. Jesus steps onto the public stage with a public demonstration and challenge of the religious establishment. In the other gospels this scene occurs toward the end, and is the impetus for those in power to begin working for Jesus crucifixion. Not here. This event sets the tone for the entire rest of the gospel – Jesus has come to upend the system.

Notice also what Jesus says: “Don’t make my father’s house a place of business.” We assume that business in the temple is a no-no. But, to be fair to the people selling animals and exchanging money, this is the system that was set up centuries earlier, way back in Deuteronomy 14.

You must reserve a tenth part of whatever your fields produce each year.²³ Eat the tenth part of your grain, wine, oil, oldest offspring of your herds and flocks in the presence of the LORD your God in the location he selects for his name to reside so that you learn to fear the LORD your God at all times.²⁴ But if the trip is too long, because the location the LORD your God has selected to put his name is far away from where you live so that you can’t transport the tenth part—because the LORD your God will certainly bless you—²⁵ then you can convert it to money. Take the money with you and go to the location the LORD your God selects.²⁶ Then you can use the money for anything you want: cattle, sheep, wine, beer, or whatever else you might like. Then you should feast there and celebrate in the presence of the LORD your God, along with your entire household.

That’s Torah, that’s the law. So it’s no wonder that the folks in the temple are a little put off by Jesus’ actions. They want an explanation. What sign can you give for doing this? What is your authority? Who are you to come in here and wreck the place, during Passover? Remember, this is the beginning of Jesus ministry. He doesn’t have institutional authority. These folks don’t know him. And we don’t have a good sense here of why Jesus is doing this.

There’s something else we need to address in this passage, because it will come up again and again in the gospel of John. The writer’s use of the term “the Jews”. The synoptic gospels mention “the Jews” five or six times. The 4th gospel uses it 70 times. And it is used to denote a group of people who are villains and antagonists, the group of “those people” who oppose Jesus, actively work against him, and eventually have him killed.

And even if it’s just a literary device setting up a foil to the hero of the story, who is Jesus, we have to be mindful of the fact that this gospel has been used over and over as a basis for Christian anti-Semitism. Martin Luther wrote a treatise “The Jews and Their Lies,” in which he repeatedly quotes the gospel of John. Jewish scholar, Adele Reinhartz points out that in this gospel Jesus and the disciples are rarely referred to as Jews. And those of us who value improving interfaith relationships have to be aware of this history when we read John’s gospel. We will read about “the Jews” as the stereotype of the rejection of Jesus message and unbelief. But we need to take care in how we apply that stereotype.

In this instance, “the Jews,” or the establishment leaders, are not particularly antagonistic, but they are questioning Jesus’ authority for disrupting the temple at its busiest time. And Jesus doesn’t seem to answer the question. He offers up a mysterious answer about destroying the temple and raising it in three days. As expected, “the religious authorities” don’t understand what he is talking about. This story sets up a tension that will last throughout the gospel – there are those who cannot and will not see who Jesus really is, understand his message, or embrace what God reveals through him.

It’s also important to know that by the time John’s gospel is written the temple itself has been destroyed for 30 years. His reader’s or listeners are interpreting this through that lens. They also know that Jesus’s answer, though cryptic to the world of the story, is referring to his own death and resurrection, an insight the narrator provides as well.

So, what’s this story about? It’s a prophetic protest against empty religion, against going through the motions, or exploiting people with unfair business practices. But it’s more than that...Jesus is relocating the place where God dwells. The tabernacle or temple is literally the place where God dwells – remember Deuteronomy 14. Jesus now refers to his own body as the temple. God’s presence is not to be found in a building, it is found in the very person of Jesus, the word of God made flesh and living among us. Why is that important? The majority of the community that received this gospel had

most likely never been in the temple. It was gone. So where are they to find God? John's answer is that Jesus is the presence of God.

So we get a glimpse of John's understanding of Jesus' divinity. But as the scene closes we get a glimpse of Jesus' humanity as well. Jesus knows people. Many people were impressed by his signs, but Jesus is taciturn. He's not jumping on the band wagon. He didn't need anyone to tell him about the fickleness of human nature. He's being very careful about who he trusts. We get a sense that He knows that most of the people who are impressed with his ministry now, don't understand where this will lead and will not stay close when the heat is turned up.

This season of Epiphany is all about the growth of the light, the spreading of the good news about Jesus Christ. In this story knowledge and acceptance of Jesus spreads throughout Jerusalem during the city's busiest festival, Passover, through this public act of overturning the systems of the temple, and through other signs that are not recorded. There was a Facebook meme going around a while ago, perhaps you've seen it. [slide change] - that's one interpretation. That we as followers of Jesus should be engaged in the work of justice – challenging the systems of injustice.

Jesus is challenging the system in another way, too. He's shaking them out of what has always been the practice and into a new relationship with God. God is not confined to the building. God is present in Jesus Christ. And the spirit of Jesus, the Advocate he promises at the end of this gospel, is with us in our midst, whether we are in this building, or another building, or out there in the world. Wherever the spirit of Jesus Christ is present we have immediate access to God's presence.

I think this is good news for many churches today, faced with difficult financial realities, worried about losing their building. Maybe the building is not what Jesus had in mind at all. The presence of God is found first in Jesus, then in those who follow him, those in whom the spirit of Christ dwells. And for people who've already lost their building, like John's community, this is tremendously good news.

But more than that, Jesus challenges us to more than just going through the motions of faith. A theme that runs through the 4th gospel is the emphasis on choosing. We'll see this in next week's story of Nicodemus – John is clear that you can't keep one foot in the old system while you test the other foot in the new way of being. You have to choose. It's a difficult demand, and for some, a costly choice.

When Jesus appears to his disciples after his resurrection in John's Gospel, Jesus breathes his spirit into them. They are now where God resides. The responsibility is a big one. Jesus challenges us in this story, he challenges the status quo, the way we've always done it, our inability or unwillingness to hear and respond to his challenge, our reliance on a building to do ministry for us. He challenges us to choose and then to act, to be persons who are faithful and trustworthy. How shall we respond?