



## The Day of Days

**John 2:13-22**

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The purpose of the season of Lent is to set aside time for reflection on Jesus Christ—to consider his suffering and his sacrifice, his life, death, burial, and resurrection. This journey lasts just over 6 weeks, covering 40 days, plus Sundays, culminating in the celebration of the resurrection at Easter.

As we reflect on Christ, there are few stories more well known in the Gospel text than the story of Jesus wreaking havoc in the Temple. It's one of the most used scriptures when trying to argue that Jesus wasn't such a pacifist in his tactics, but was at minimum argumentative, and perhaps a bit agitational. It's a story that can quickly catch one's attention – not in the least because *many* a pastor like to set up a table of plates at the front of the room when using this text. Halfway through the sermon, the pastor mimics the disruptiveness of Christ by flipping the table and allowing the plates to come crashing to the floor. Like a WWE match, it's smoke and mirrors for the sake of grasping your attention.

But the story isn't so simple, especially when you consider that John's recollection of the story is quite a bit different than that of the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So, let's take a deep dive into the commotion at the Temple that we might glean a new consideration of faithfulness from Jesus's righteous anger.

The story of Jesus flipping tables in the Temple takes place at the time of the Passover. This offers one major difference between John and the synoptics. See, in the narrative accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus's outburst in the Temple took place during Passover on Jesus's final week before the crucifixion. Jesus had hardly finished his donkey ride down the Mount of Olives with the crowds crying "Hosanna" before he entered the temple in such a fit of rage. Jesus's cleansing of the Temple in these three accounts seems to be one of the final straws that broke the proverbial camel's back.

Yet, in John's Gospel, Jesus' cleansing of the temple takes place at the start of his ministry. Jesus has called the disciples to follow him and has just performed his first miracle – changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana. It is here at the outset of his ministry, during the Passover, in what we might call year one of his teaching ministry, that Jesus is remembered cleansing the temple.

Whether in year one or year three of Jesus' ministry, all four gospels have this story taking place during the Passover. The Passover is one of the primary Jewish religious remembrances. It offers a week-long celebration of God's saving work in the Exodus, which provided a new beginning for the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. During the Passover, the Jews refrain from eating leavened bread – bread made with yeast – as a remembrance of their time wandering in the wilderness, when they were sustained by the unleavened manna that fell from heaven. They eat lamb, as a reminder of the blood that

marked the lintel of their doors so the Lord would pass over their homes and provide safety for their children. And they ate bitter herbs, symbolizing the bitterness and harshness of the slavery they had endured in Egypt.

In Jesus' day, there was still an expectation that all Jews capable of making the trip would return to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, and that, as a part of that celebration, they would offer an animal sacrifice as outlined in the Hebrew Scriptures. Deuteronomy 16:2 reads, "You shall offer the Passover sacrifice for the Lord your God, from the flock and the herd, at the place that the Lord will choose as a dwelling for his name."

If you've ever wondered why it was there were money changers and animal vendors at the Temple for Jesus to drive out, the answer is quite simple: it was the week of Passover. The animals that were being sold were used for the blood sacrifice. Jewish pilgrims traveling from distant lands did not want to bring animals with them from such great distances, so they would purchase animals for sacrifice once they arrived at the temple. This also indicates the need for money changers. Some of the Jews returning to Jerusalem would need their foreign currency exchanged for the local currency before they could purchase the animals, or before they could pay to have their animals inspected prior to the sacrifice. They would also need to exchange out their money to pay the temple tax, which was an expected half-shekel.<sup>i</sup>

This is where the story gets a bit messy – literally.

John's gospel says that Jesus came in to the Temple, and, making a whip of cords, drove out the animals and money-changers, overturned the tables, and poured their coins on the floor. Again, the events differ a bit from the synoptics. In the other Gospel accounts, Jesus is recorded as having said, "This is supposed to be a house of prayer, but you have made it into a den of robbers." In John's gospel, Jesus is recorded as saying, "Stop making my Father's house a market-place," or using the Greek, "an emporium."

Like I said, this gets a bit messy, and not just because there are now animals running around having been whipped by Jesus to leave the temple grounds, or because there is money strewn about on the floor. The events that Jesus condemns at the Temple are part of the pilgrims' passage during the Passover celebration. Without the sale of animals, or the exchanging of currency, those who have travelled to the Temple to be a part of the Biblically mandated celebration can't really participate. Jesus's attack on the selling of animals would make it hard for those who needed animals for blood sacrifice to make such a sacrifice.<sup>ii</sup>

As New Testament Professor Alicia Myers writes, "Jesus effectively turns the temple court into a tumult of frightened animals and shouting merchants, while pilgrims and priests stand aghast. Why on earth would Jesus *stop* purification – and why in such a dramatic way?"<sup>iii</sup>

If we were to focus just on the synoptics' critique that the place had become a "den of robbers," we might focus in on the fact that those exchanging money, or selling sacrificial animals, were doing so using dishonest and exploitative economic practices. No doubt, "Such businesses would have thrived ...

at Passover, when numerous lambs or other animals would be needed.”<sup>iv</sup> The vendors and money changers had a cornered market – those who had travelled from long distances needed what they had to offer, even if it meant paying an exorbitant upcharge.

But John’s Gospel indicates the problem wasn’t simply the exploitation of Jewish pilgrims. If corruption was the only problem, perhaps Jesus would have been more focused on reform by inviting the Temple leaders to step in and insist on fair and equitable rates for sales taking place on temple grounds for mandated temple practices. But John’s Gospel goes even further. “[Jesus] protests the business of buying and selling in the temple precinct because such enterprise is incompatible with the temple’s identity as ‘my Father’s house.’”<sup>v</sup> The price, or price gouging wasn’t the problem, it was the commercial enterprise in and of itself. Again, in John 2:16, Jesus says, “Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!” Jesus isn’t just critiquing the unjust economic practices, he’s chastising the very presence of a market.

Expectedly, there are many present who were unhappy with Jesus’ disgruntled actions. Picking up in verse 18, we read, “The Jews,” which is likely referring to those whom Jesus is indicting in this public display of affliction, “The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’” They wanted verification of authority.

This line of questioning is a fairly regular practice, even outside of such moments of chastisement. It’s like asking the common question, “who sent you?” Those who felt they were being publicly ridiculed and condemned wanted to know who had credentialed Jesus – on whose authority he spoke such words of condemnation.

I don’t know about you, but I find it humorous that we always want to credential those who challenge our thoughts or power, but hardly ever question the authenticity or expertise of those who agree with us or who offer support.

Jesus is prepared to respond. What sign shall I send you? Jesus answers, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

Now ... now look ... the Jews clearly missed what Jesus was saying, and we might too if we do not pay close attention to his words. The Jews quickly snapped back, “The temple has been under construction for 46 years, and you’re going to rebuilt it in 3 days?”

We have the benefit of John’s narrative, which in the very next verse makes clear Jesus was speaking not of the Jerusalem temple, but of his body. But, look at what Jesus says, “*Destroy this temple*, and in three days I will raise it up.” Jesus is real fancy with his wording here. His statement offers a dangling modifier with the word “temple,” which makes the Jews *think* he’s speaking of the structure they are standing in. But, quite expertly, he’s offering a statement of truth about his own body. The word “destroy” is spoken in an aorist imperfect tense, which is to say, he’s making an declarative statement about what *will happen*. Not if (*not if*), but *when* you destroy this temple, I will raise it up in three days. It’s like he’s saying, “Go ahead, try me.”

This passage ends with the apostle John offering confirmation about what Jesus intended with this statement. John's a theological guy, and in his Gospel, Jesus' words almost always have a symbolic meaning behind them. John names, "[Jesus] 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."

Jesus names multiple times that the place of worship is not always going to be understood as the Jerusalem temple. Remember when Jesus met with the Samaritan woman at the well? What did he say to her? ... "The day is coming when you will not worship here on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, but true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth." Like the temple leaders, we often get so focused on the building that we call the church, that we forget what God has given us as the holy dwelling place. Jesus is the dwelling place of God – that is to say, the body of Christ is the dwelling place of God. There's a reason Jesus can claim that where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, God is there in the midst of them – because it is in the body of Christ where God finds an ultimate place of dwelling. "The interpretation refers not only to Jesus' resurrected body but also to the community, which would provide the unique dwelling for God's presence after Jesus' death and the temple's destruction." <sup>vi</sup>

In this season of Lent, we are journeying toward Easter with the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his book, *Stride Toward Freedom*. This week, we are looking at Chapter 4, which talks about the first day of the bus boycott – December 5, 1955. I was struck by the way King described the evening gathering that took place that night, which was to offer some guidance as to the future of the boycott. King says that, as he arrived Holt Street Church, where the meeting was taking place that night, he had to park four blocks away because the crowd was so large. He says there were some three to four thousand people who couldn't fit in the building itself.

At the end of that night, King offered in reflection the victory of that night was the mass meeting, "where thousands of black people stood revealed with a new sense of dignity and destiny."<sup>vii</sup> He says that gathering was more of a win than even the bus situation itself.

See, friends, I think King understood something that we often fail to grasp. We have a song in the church called "Power in the Blood." You probably know the words: "There is power, power, wonder-working power in the blood of the lamb. There is power, power, wonder-working power in the precious blood of the lamb." ... The song isn't wrong. I'm not critiquing the power of Jesus' blood. But what King understood, that I think we often fail to see, is that there is power in the Body of Christ. King understood the power of God's people standing together proclaiming truth. King understood that such a witness could not be explained in any other way, than to declare Jesus' words that the presence of God dwells in the body of Christ.

King says of this kind of gathering, "There is a creative power that works to pull down mountains of evil and level hilltops of justice. God still works through history His wonders to perform." We often mistakenly think God is trapped inside our buildings – like the temple – which is why our denomination struggles to find a faithful path forward – we are so caught up in the wealth and the ownership of

denominational land that we can't see God calling us to acknowledge the power of Christ in our presence.

And so Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I'll raise it from the dead." I know that as this pandemic rolls on we miss gathering in this building and the space of community it provides, but friends, Jesus calls us not to gather in a building – not to think God dwells only in these four walls – not to be so limited as to our understanding of when and where God works in the world, but to recognize the temple of God we need is found in Jesus Christ. The promise of new life to come, comes in the person of Christ. The invitation of God to receive is not limited to the bricks and mortar at 109 S. Washington Street, it's expansive and invitational, it's ever present that you might receive the promise of God's love wherever you are gathered this day, whether in Alexandria, Chicago, Houston, or beyond.

Let us not miss God's earth-shattering Word in our midst, that Christ is with us, and that as God's people, we are invited to be the presence of Christ for the world today. For when we claim God's power in our midst, nothing shall be impossible, not even the resurrection of God's people, the body of Christ, to live fully into its witness of God's great death-defying love. May we claim and proclaim such a witness that all may know God's glory. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Alicia D. Meyers. Workingpreacher.org. Retrieved March 1, 2021.

<sup>ii</sup> Richard D. Swanson. *Provoking the Gospel of John*. Pilgrim Press, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> Meyers.

<sup>iv</sup> Marianne Meye Thompson. *John: A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

<sup>v</sup> Thompson.

<sup>vi</sup> Hankins.

<sup>vii</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1958.