**Sermon for March 3 2024 John 2:13-22 “Setting the Stage”**

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.

*Now, Jesus was a peaceful man, as peaceful as can be,*

*He often walked beside the tranquil shores of Galilee,*

*but one day in the Temple, he got mighty vexed,*

*and shouted out a warning that had everyone perplexed, he said…*

***Get Out! Get Out! You’re not welcome here no more,***

***your buying and your selling block the way to heaven’s door,***

***you’ve made this house of worship like an old time country store,***

***Get Out! Get Out! You’re not welcome here no more!***

And thus begins one of the most famous of all bible stories, the one everybody knows, the one that shows up in every single Gospel, the one that allegedly shows Jesus *losing it* in public, great fodder for the scorning wags who snort, “Humph! Some Prince of Peace!” This story has been pivotal in the Church’s history, especially early on when we were trying to sort out the *nature* of Jesus. Was he God? Was he purely human? Ultimately, we decided that he was both fully human *and* fully divine, a mystery we have decided to live with. And so we have two candles on the altar, not just for symmetry, but to remind us of this fully human/fully divine reality among us.

Clearly, the fully *human* aspect of our Lord was functioning on overdrive that day, as zeal for God’s house consumed him with what we call righteous anger. I have felt this anger and so have you, and there are times, times of prophetic witness, times of defense of the defenseless, times in the life of every Christian that righteous anger is appropriate; indeed, anything less is unfaithful. How we *express* that anger is another facet to be addressed, but the anger itself can be real and hot and justified. We are called, not just to cuddle, not just to coddle, not just to comfort, but also to confront, also to convict, and most of all, to be a voice for justice and against greed and prideful manipulation in all of its demonic forms.

This is getting a little heavy…let’s return to the song, shall we?

*Now, right there in the narthex, there were cattle, sheep and doves,*

*what he saw made him so mad that he pulled on his boxing gloves,*

*He made a whip of chords, and he tanned ‘em real good,*

*and shouted once again so he was clearly understood, he said…*

***Get Out! Get Out! You’re not welcome here no more,***

***Your buying and your selling block the way to heaven’s door,***

***You’ve made this house of worship like an old time country store,***

***Get Out! Get Out! You’re not welcome here no more!***

Why was Jesus so angry? His was an agrarian culture; surely the presence of animals in the outer courtyards of the Temple wasn’t offensive. What enraged Jesus was the injustice, the selling at inflated prices, the cheating on the exchange rates as the world’s peoples traded in their native coin for the official temple money. The sacrificial system required these animals, but pilgrims and other travelers would not cart them along over hill and dale, they would simply buy them when they arrived. And the scamming, the manipulation, the pressing advantage just infuriated Jesus. Still do, as near as I know…word to the wise, huh?

The most interesting scholarly thing about this story is it’s location in the Gospels. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this event happens at the beginning of the final week of Jesus’ earthly life. It precipitates, maybe even causes, the simmering discomfort of the religious leaders, and they boil over with murderous intent, and a week later Jesus is dead. But not so in today’s gospel, the gospel of John, where this incident happens *right at the beginning* of Jesus’ ministry. It sets the stage for a forthright, declamatory, self-assured Savior who has no trouble setting people straight when they have left the path of holiness.

And it challenges us modern ‘swords into plowshares’ believers, who want peace to prevail and confrontation to be minimalized, if not eliminated entirely. We have been living an incomplete gospel if we will not or do not confront injustice; if we will not or do not stand up for those who cannot stand on their own, if we will not or do not take seriously the commandment to reprove and rebuke, to call unholy behaviors to account. The great Augustine of Hippo referred to cleansing of the temple to justify rebuking others for their sinful behavior with these words: "Stop those whom you can, restrain whom you can, frighten whom you can, allure gently whom you can, do not, however, rest silent." This story set the stage for Jesus’ ministry and can encourage us, too, to move beyond being merely nice as we strive to affect our world’s bad habits.

But as always, the theoretical must eventually confer with the practical. Having righteous anger is good, necessary, perhaps even a sign of spiritual maturity, but how we *express* that anger determines the difference between prophets and parolees. Navigating the laws of the land, navigating the often-nebulous edges of our social contract, navigating within our own conscience and all of its questionable learnings, this is no easy task. Unschooled, unthinking righteous *rage* has no honor here, but there are times, there are situations, there are grievances so great that the considered response must not be wrapped in fleece and delivered with a mint on the pillow. And Jesus modeled for us one of those times.

Now, twenty centuries later, it’s the story we recall,

When Jesus’ thoughtful anger up and emptied out the hall,

Their tables were turned over, and their coins were on the floor,

And he left ‘em with a message they remembered evermore, he said…

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