

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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March 3, 2024

It is wonderful being here this third Sunday in Lent. To be back in this sanctuary leading worship with you is such a gift. Yet, knowing Wicker Park is an ever-changing community, there are many of you who don't know me. My name is Pastor Paisley and I had the gift of serving as vicar here in 2019-2020. I accompanied Pastor Jason and the rest of the church staff through the abrupt transition to COVID worship four years ago during this Lenten Season.

So, it feels right and a homecoming of sorts to be in this place, in this season, and in this pulpit, exploring this text with you. So, let's dive in.

We've, of course, jumped gospels this week. We have been walking with Mark and now we begin a series of Sundays in the Gospel of John. I point this out because the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John, I think, are the most opposite from each other. We have Mark who has bare-boned details, who catapults Jesus from baptism to the cross, and who doesn't even originally tell of the resurrection! On the other hand, we have John, who goes into such detail as to almost be incomprehensible, who focuses on the divine, and who names resurrection almost in the same breath as naming Jesus.

Where Mark is concerned with the immediacy of the kingdom of heaven,

John is concerned with upholding the power and divinity of Jesus.

The differences between Mark and John continue in this passage from today. Mark has his rendition of this story in the same place as the other synoptic gospels – Matthew and Luke – at the very end of the story. They speak of Jesus's triumphant entrance into Jerusalem for Palm Sunday, he goes and cleanses the Temple that has become a "den of robbers" and it is this interaction that is the final thread for the Judean officials. Next comes his arrest, trial, and execution.

However, for John, this Temple scene happens almost immediately. This scene is right at the beginning of Jesus's ministry. Jesus has been to the Wedding at Cana and performed his first sign, he's rested in Capernaum for a few days, and then he heads to Jerusalem as all Jewish folks were meant to do, to celebrate the Passover. We hear he arrives and finds all sorts of people selling animals for sacrifice. Upon seeing this, he makes a whip of cords and drives them out. He dumps the coins of the money changers on the ground by flipping their tables.

When we Christians tell this story, this is the point where we usually say that Jesus was shocked, appalled, disgusted to see the marketplace there in the Temple courtyard!

But the truth is, upon entering the Temple, Jesus wouldn't have been surprised by the scene at all. After all, in addition to being a place of worship, the Temple was a cultural meeting place, it was where people

gathered to learn, to be in community, and, especially around the feast days, it was a place where goods were exchanged and where animals were purchased for sacrifice. So the presence of animals for sale, the presence of money-changers at tables with first-century cash boxes, would not have been unusual at all.

If anything, it is Jesus' reaction to this rather normal occurrence that's unusual – and his reaction, remember, is extreme. It's to make a whip of cords and drive them out. So, what is going on here?

Most commentators agree that the issue was not that there was trading going on in the Temple. The issue was that corruption had made its way into the dealings with the money changers. For many, traders and dealers were not simply providing for the needs of the Temple and its worshippers, they were trying to make a profit. They were turning the work of God into a business to fill their pockets and glorify themselves. This is why Jesus says, "stop making my Father's House a marketplace!"

Unfortunately, with any human institution comes corruption. Or at least the possibility for it. We know this and Jesus knew this too. And I think it's even trickier when it comes to something like religion because how easily we can begin worshipping the institution rather than the one we are gathered to praise! And how easy it is to find ourselves trying to make a profit off of doing God's good work – whether literally or in terms of social capital.

To get to the bottom of this text, we must, as always, think about the people these words were written for. John's gospel, written around 70 CE, is written to a Jewish community living in a world where not only the first Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians, but also the second Temple that had finally been rebuilt after forty-six long years, had also been destroyed. This time by the Romans. For a people whose ancestors believed that the true presence of God resides within the walls of the Temple, this is a heartbreaking truth – a traumatizing reality. Our author writes to a community trying to hold together belief that Jesus is the Messiah, the holy one of God, with the real pain of having lost their Temple *again*.<sup>1</sup> The readers of the gospel of John were believers in God's savior, who was promised to be Jesus, who by this time had lived and died and risen again, and yet still they watched as the temple of God fell apart before their eyes, destroyed again by another occupying army, just like last time.

With this particular people in mind, our Gospel passage rings a little differently. These words were not written to pit Christians against Jews. The people who received these words would never have thought that Jesus' flipping of the tables was anti-Jewish – they would have seen this, quite clearly, as Jesus joining the line of prophets who all cried out in protest when the people were profaning the Temple!

And – the people who received these words from John would surely remember what was written in Psalm 69, which Jesus is quoting here: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

The people who received these words in the Year 70 ... who were living without the Temple... knew that there was more to God than the Temple. There had to be.

Right? There had to be – because if God could only dwell in the Temple, then there was no hope.

In comes Jesus with those mysterious words: Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

They were confused, because they thought he meant the temple their ancestors had built, that beautiful place filled with beautiful prayer. But he was speaking of the temple of his body, which God had built Godself, which was filled with pain as well as beauty, marked by scars as well as strength. After Jesus was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this.

Recall for a moment how the Gospel of John began:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was

God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup> in him was life,<sup>[a]</sup> and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The Word was with God and was God, from the beginning. The Temple of the Word was with God and was God, from the beginning, and still now.

This would have had a profound impact on John's listeners. To hear Jesus come in and say "what you are doing here is not everything there is," and then to offer a new name for himself – temple of the word, temple of God – well, it meant something serious. It was giving a hope they had long thought was lost. Jesus was saying that regardless of acts of violence or cruelty or evil or hate, no power could come against God's Temple or Godself that God could not overcome and transcend with glory.

In this Lenten season, as we journey with Jesus to the cross, let us remember that our God is the God who raised the temple on the third day. May we be consumed by zeal not for our house, but for your house; not by our word, but your word; not by our will, but your will.

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Working Preacher, Dong Hyeon Jeong, 2024.