

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA**

March 3, 2024 – THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Let Jesus Drive Out Whatever Keeps You from Him*”

Exodus 20:1-17	(God gives the Ten Commandments)
Psalms 19:7-14	(The Law of the Lord is perfect)
1 Corinthians 1:18-25	(The cross is foolishness to the worldly wise)
St. John 2:13-22	(Jesus drives the merchants from the Temple and foretells His death and resurrection)

Today, Jesus goes to the Jerusalem Temple to worship, and when He enters God's House, our Lord is crushed by what He sees. His anger builds up quickly, and in a scene that isn't much like the Jesus we know from our children's Bibles, He grabs some ropes, makes a whip, and starts chasing people out of the sanctuary. He yells at them, overturns tables, scatters their money, and kicks all the animals out.

What happened to the stained-glass Jesus? The guy who smiles at everyone and bounces little children on His knee? Is it okay for Jesus to get angry? Even furious? In this scene, Jesus seems more like a bouncer at a night club. This may make us a bit uncomfortable, and we can be sure the people who were there, including Christ's disciples, were shocked at His behavior.

Yet this is a story about Jesus' life that appears in all four gospels, so it must be important. What's different is the *timing* of Jesus' outburst when it occurs in John's gospel. Matthew (Ch. 21), Mark (Ch. 11), and Luke (Ch. 19) all place this story *after* Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. At the close of Palm Sunday, Jesus walks into the Temple, sees the corruption there, and throws the scoundrels out. But so far in John, Jesus has been introduced with St. John's poetic and philosophical opening; John the Baptist's testimony about His coming; Jesus calling His disciples; and the wedding at Cana. For Jesus to suddenly be raising such a ruckus in the Temple seems premature, but St. John always does things a bit differently than the other evangelists.

In John's gospel, there is no baptism or temptation story. There is no prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. Instead we find stories that are unique to John's gospel, such as Jesus washing His disciples' feet at the Last Supper, and the “I Am” statements of Jesus, as when He says, “I am the good shepherd” or “I am the light of the world.” Back in Exodus, when Moses encountered the living God and asked His name, God's only answer was, “I Am.” John is careful to make this connection with the identity of Jesus, whom he is intent on proving is God incarnate.

So why, for John, is this scene in the Temple one of the *first* things Jesus does in his ministry, and not one of the *last*, as in the other three gospels? The answer is simple: John is setting us up to see God's power over this world and to reveal how much change will come through Jesus Christ. This chapter started with Jesus turning water into wine—John's way of telling us that the old rite of purification is changing, now that God has come to earth in the person of Jesus and His ministry. Now, the water will be that of baptism, signifying repentance and faith in Christ.

Just so, worship and the purpose of the Temple is changing, too. No longer will undefiled animals be required to atone for sin, because Jesus Himself is the spotless Lamb of God, offered in atonement for the whole world. No longer will there be a need for a stone and mortar Temple because Jesus' body broken for us will assume its purpose, as He becomes the focus of our worship and adoration.

Jesus' visit to the Temple and His outrage at those who are profaning it with their crass commercial selling of animals for the sacrifices happens early in John's gospel because God's Word made flesh will revolutionize *everything*. But most of us are not comfortable with change. We would be happiest if everything stayed the same as it always was. However, the only constant in life—especially when God is involved—is change! The Temple itself had undergone many modifications, and likely did not start out as corrupt as the day Jesus walked in.

There weren't always bankers and merchants taking up space in its courtyard. This came about over time, and to the participants it made sense. To atone for one's sins, people needed special animals and money that was restricted to Temple offerings only. It would have been difficult for pilgrims to travel with such animals, and the necessary coins could only be purchased on site. So those merchants and bankers believed they were using the space in the Temple courtyard to fulfill an important need for worship. They had a practical purpose for being there. Yet Jesus found it detestable and furiously drove them out!

So here we are again, uncomfortable with Jesus' forceful display of anger. The Bible has a lot to say about anger. Several times we are told "the Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in love," and that God's "anger lasts only a moment."¹ In Ephesians 4:26–27 believers are counseled, "In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." Some of us may have been raised with the idea that Christians should not lose our tempers. But if *Jesus* is having a fit, then what are we to think?

The answer is, there are two kinds of anger. The first is what Jesus displays: *righteous* anger—getting mad about things that go against God's law and/or God's will and purposes. That means it's okay to feel upset about injustice and poverty, the horrors of war, religious heresy, or gross immorality. The second kind of anger is *self-righteous* anger. We get bent out of shape because someone's stupid remark has offended us. Or we feel aggravated with a family member who's not going along with what we want. We may even lose our temper when we simply don't get our way.

Those are the times when we need to count to ten (or twenty), maybe disengage, and definitely, *pray!* And if a beef goes on too long, as Scripture instructs us, "don't let the sun go down on it, and don't give the devil a foothold" (because Satan *revels* in selfish anger). That means if you and your spouse or significant other have a fight over dinner, you can't go to sleep until you work it out. (Rick and I have had to do that a couple of times over the past 30 years.) Ditto for straightening things out with friends, neighbors, co-workers, or anyone else you're angry with. Refusing to let go of that rage is bad for our physical, mental, and spiritual health.

Today's Gospel passage hits us right where it hurts, because Jesus isn't attacking the religious leaders here. No, He's walking into the sanctuary, looking around, and throwing out what is offensive in *God's* eyes. And in doing so, He threatens us—you and me—both in the pews and behind the pulpit, challenging us to look with new eyes at *our* 'temple,' and to ask whether we have allowed ourselves to become too comfortable with what may be displeasing to—or meaningless to—God.²

If Jesus walked into our church, what would He throw out? Would He come in and toss away our iPhones, Smartwatches, and Fitness Trackers—not to mention all our *mental distractions*—in order for each of us to be more fully present in worship? Would He come in with a claw hammer and yank all our sacred art, bulletin board notices, and news clippings off the walls because they build up pride in ourselves instead of honoring God? Would He step up to the ambo and rip my sermon into pieces because He's ashamed that at times I do not sufficiently trust the Holy Spirit to provide the message I bring on Sundays, but rather, attempt to rely on my own skills and cleverness? Would He be happy with our building itself, or would Jesus shake His head and remind us that the Church is the Body of Christ—us, His servants active in ministry—*not* stones and mortar, no matter how beautiful these may be?

After Jesus tosses everyone out of the courtyard of the Jerusalem Temple, the people ask, "By what authority are you doing these things?" That's an odd question because no one asks the one *we want to ask*: "Why?" "Why did you throw out stuff that mattered to us?" Because they *know* why. When Jesus walked in and confronted them, on some level this confirmed for them what they were doing was wrong. The merchants and money changers had lost sight of what the Temple was there for—as House of Prayer for all God's people, not a shopping mall.

Next, Jesus speaks about the Temple's destruction, yet claims He will rebuild it in three days. And that makes His *hearers* fighting mad! But it is the *new Temple*, Jesus' own body, that will be destroyed, and *God* will raise it again in three days. This new Temple will not need bricks and mortar, only Christ's Body and Blood.

Lent is a season in which we are called to come to God honestly and openly, to face where we fall short of His glory and to ask for His forgiveness—particularly, as we saw today, in the areas of unchecked selfish anger, smoldering resentment, and long-held grudges. Thanks be to God, we *will* receive that forgiveness, but the hardest part is for us to admit we are in need of it.

The Rev. Dr. Peter Samuelson, a Lutheran pastor, writes, “Jesus came not to destroy just the temples we build to serve ourselves but also to raise up a new temple for us, a temple in which we can truly be reconciled to God. Every temple made with human hands, every system we attempt to construct, will end up only serving ourselves. In Jesus, God offers us a temple where we can receive the forgiveness of sin without cost, where we can be reconciled to God without trying to make a buck, where we can worship the one true God and be free from our bondage to greed and self-service. In our baptism, we enter this temple, becoming one with the Body of Christ, living in the temple of God's love and forgiveness forever.”³

How uncomfortable is that? It's not. What's hardest to acknowledge is what might be getting in the way of our truly, freely, and fully worshipping God in Spirit and in Truth.

Even if we don't know the answer, let's have the courage to ask Jesus to drive it out—and to replace it with His love and purposes.

Amen.

¹ Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 30:5, 86:15, 103:8; John 4:2.

² Adapt. Jim Parsons, “Uncomfortable,” [Adventures In Revland](http://adventures-in-revland.blogspot.com/2012/03/john-213-22-sermon-uncomfortable.html#!2012/03/john-213-22-sermon-uncomfortable.html), 8 March 2012 <<http://adventures-in-revland.blogspot.com/2012/03/john-213-22-sermon-uncomfortable.html#!2012/03/john-213-22-sermon-uncomfortable.html>> 10 March 2012.

³ Adapt. Peter L. Samuelson, “Reflections from the Woodshed,” [Day1.org](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cd20026fb/reflections_from_the_woodshed), 15 March 2009 <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cd20026fb/reflections_from_the_woodshed> 26 February 2024.