

## **Lent 3**

### **John 2:13-22**

#### **“A Temple Cleansed”**

I want you to imagine you are sitting at your kitchen table with a 5-year-old. You're playing with playdough. You're squeezing the green through the little spaghetti maker, the red is getting rolled into an excellent ball, and the purple has been cut into little stars. Then, all of a sudden, a man named Noah McVicker kicks in the door. Wielding an extension cord as a whip, He smashes your chairs and flips over your mid-century modern table. And screams: “What are you doing?!” Bewildered, you realize that Noah is the time-traveling inventor of playdough, and he originally had made it to be used to clean wallpaper.

While this would never happen, it is sort of reminiscent of our text. Today, we have a very unique account of the life of Christ. Much of the Christian church year is dedicated to a different ‘kind’ of Jesus. It's devoted to Jesus, meek and mild, born in a stable instead of a house. It's filled with stories of Jesus' compassion for the weakest and most vulnerable of society: Healing the disabled, speaking on behalf of those battered by the law, Jesus so innocent and gentle receiving the blows before his crucifixion.

Here is a different kind of Jesus, a Jesus that many who have a caricature of Christ in their minds as the pacifist, which could be a little jarring. But this is an essential view of Jesus; after all, this account is recorded in all four of the Gospels. Here is where it seems to be, the only act of Jesus acting violently. Jesus, with fire and passion on his face, clears the temple. He takes rope and binds them into a whip. He goes to animal stalls, and he drives out cattle and sheep. He goes to the tables and flips them over. The ones doing currency exchanging, he snatches their bags of coins and scatters them on the ground. Physical acts that were matched with words: Get out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!

Why does Jesus do, well, this? Seems like Jesus needs to chill out. Well no. His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.” This is a demonstration of the zeal of the Lord. You see, zeal can be a positive or a negative thing. It's either an intense positive interest in something/someone or intense negative feelings over another's success. God's envy is always and only for his people. He is zealous when his children go after other gods and zealous for his people when they go astray. God's zeal always drives him to action to right a wrong.

What wrong is Jesus' righting? The other Gospels listed that the money changers were gouging prices and overcharging for sacrifices. But that's not listed here, and after all, the purchase of animals for temple worship was allowed, especially as many had to come from huge distances. The problem Jesus lists here is not one of the objects but of

importance. Let's reread it: "When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money."

They were in the temple. They were in the place of worship. As God had said in the Old Testament, the temple was paramount. It was at the temple that you came near to the glory of the Lord. It was at the temple that you participated in the most holy of festivals. It was in the temple that God's physical presence was. It was a place of prayer. It was a place of worship. It was a place for recognition and remembrance of the merciful God of Israel.

And what was going on? In the courtyard where you were supposed to be praying, you have a stockyard. In a place where joyful song was supposed to ring out, there was the drowning noise of haggling prices. In a place where worship of the almighty was supposed to be at the forefront, clinking of coins. And why? Because it's convenient! Because it's lucrative. Because they could. The temple now had a secondary emphasis for those who came to worship; to others, it had been reduced to simply their place of business. God would not let that fly. So his zeal, intense concern, and devotion to service to his Lord led him to clear out that temple. To get rid of anything that hinders or distracts.

An important question for us is, does Jesus need to cleanse our temple? Not our physical church, but the temple of our minds and hearts? Have we allowed things to creep in closer and closer and distract us? Our oh-so-busy schedules, our dedication to our favorite hobbies, the prospect of financial gain, or our schooling. In reality, we have plenty of things that drown out the priority and purpose of our worship. The clinking of the coins drowns out the focus of our prayers. The cooing of the doves disrupts our confrontation with our own sinfulness and our confession. The calls of the cattle pulling our minds from worship.

On the other side, has our temple become just our job? I'm in church every week, but the primary reason is because it's just what I do. Prayers are simply my ritual and nothing more. My confession is just the words that come from my lips and nothing more, even though I am in the temple courts. Even though I am close, my heart is very much in another place.

But I want you to realize something. Jesus clears out temples, both the one in Jerusalem and the one in our own hearts, for an essential reason. His zeal comes not from his concern for his children. Jesus dumps tables, drives out cows, and scatters coins to clear the way. He clears the way for us to see the true temple right in front of us: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

In Jerusalem, Jesus cleared out the distractions so those who had waited so long could see him. He removed all distractions so they could see that the imperfect representation was right in front of them. The beasts who would give their blood were scattered and there in front of them was the lamb of God, whose perfect blood would be shed to pay for the sins of the world, once for all. The temple where the Lord's presence used to be, where only the High Priest could go, had now given way to the presence of the Lord, who walked among them as a human being. Jesus pushes aside everything, and what is left is himself, saying: "Look to me! Realize what is important. I have come not merely as a disruptive prophet but as the prophet, priest, and King for you, my children. I have come to give forgiveness of sins and life everlasting."

We still have that same Savior, a God full of zeal for us. A God who his deep compassion will drive, to topples tables, scatter coins, and herd beasts away, if they get in the way of our salvation.

As Jesus clears our temples, the Law is always the preparatory work for the Gospel. As Jesus clears out our distractions and refocuses us from our familiarity, what do we see? We see our Savior. We see, with nothing in our way, the beauty of Jesus. We see God, who lived as one of us purely because of his love. We see an innocent man who would willingly suffer unjustly all for us. We see the Christ, who went as a willing sacrifice, so we would never need to be worried that our sins are forgiven. We see the God-man who rose from the dead, which brings undying confidence to those who face their own deaths and comfort to all who have lost a Christian whom they have loved.

This reading ties in so nicely with our second lesson from 1 Corinthians. "but we preach Christ crucified." Jesus wants nothing more than for us to gaze upon this truth in the temples of our hearts. A sin that condemns the heart? Jesus wants nothing more than to clear the distractions so you may gaze upon his wounds, which forgive. Are you worried that your life is not living up to the standard that God has? Jesus wants nothing more than to quiet the noise that you may hear: "Your sins are forgiven." Are you at the door of death? Jesus wants you to have nothing between you and him when he says: Destroy this temple, and in three days, I will raise it up."

Noah McVickers will never bust down your door and cleanse your kitchen table from the misuse of his wonderous invention. But Christians, as Christ cleared the temple in Jerusalem, he also clears your own. In his zeal, God removes all distractions from us as we focus on our Savior. What a fitting time to look at this account. As we move through the season of lent, let us continue to let our lives be cleansed of distractions. As we gather more often, let us not become numb to the beauty of our Savior. May we just like the disciples after our temples have been cleared: "his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken."