

Jesus Visits the Temple  
(or, "How Do You Handle  
Your Anger?")

John 2:13-22

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Oakland Avenue PCUSA

James T. Richardson

**JOHN 2:13-22 (NRSV)**

- 13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.  
 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.  
 15 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.  
 16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"  
 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." (JTR=Psalm 69:9)  
 18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?"  
 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up."  
 20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?"  
 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body.  
 22 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.

My mind is on our national economy. Is that where you are as well?

My memory of my classes in psychology and counseling remind me that during periods of severe stress and anxiety, a person needs to concentrate on one's feelings and emotions, making sure that you are being honest with yourself. It happens during times of grief and loss. It also happens during the uncertainties of war. It is a time when a believer (such as you and I are) needs to be still and listen to what God may be saying. That, incidentally, is what the Season of Lent is all about! You and I are there now!

**The *emotion* that I am experiencing right now is anxiety. The scripture passage that the Lectionary puts before us for today involves the *emotion* of anger.**

The setting for today's story is Jerusalem. There is no debate at all among the gospel writers about the location, for each of the four gospels tell the story and all say that it happened in Jerusalem. That is understandable when one realizes that Jewish law stated that all male Jews within twenty miles of Jerusalem were supposed to come to the Holy City in order to celebrate the Passover Festival.

The thing about today's story that is debated by the four gospels is not the location of the story but the time of the story. The gospel-writer John says that it occurred right at the first of the ministry of Jesus, and so he tells it in his early chapters. On the other hand, Matthew and Mark and Luke all say that it occurred during the last week of the life of Jesus, the week which you and I refer to as Passion Week or Holy Week. Therefore, Matthew and Mark and Luke all tell this story in their final chapters.

I side with the synoptic gospels and against the Gospel of John on this chronological order and say that somehow John, or those who passed his Gospel down to us, got this story out of its proper place which is the latter days of the life of Jesus.

But this debate is not important. What is important is that the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. The first lesson that we can learn in today's passage deals with Jesus and his understanding of **the religious institution.**

Were I painting a *picture* for you of Jesus' understanding of the religious institution of his day, I would no doubt use the color **RED** because the picture would show us an **ANGRY** Jesus.

The scene is the Court of the Gentiles, the only place in the Temple that was assigned to Gentiles for prayer. That is where you and I would be. The Chief Priest **Annas** had turned it into a holy market place where, at a profit to the priests of the

Temple, pilgrims from all around the Mediterranean world could buy animals for sacrifice and could get, at a very unfair rate of exchange, a Temple *half-shekel* with which to pay the Temple Tax. One could pay the Temple Tax only with the prescribed Temple Money, and before one could worship, one had to pay the Temple Tax!

So, in a place which Jesus had once called “My Father’s House,” Jesus now found all the sweltering and smell of a dirty cattle-market and the haggling of an even dirtier exchange of money!

If nothing else, today’s story dispels the concept of Jesus that some have held in the Church which shows Jesus as being only sweet and gentle and meek and mild. For John’s picture of Jesus shows Jesus with a whip in his hand, driving out the animals from the Temple, and running from booth to booth, turning over the tables of the money-changers and pouring their coins out onto the floor.

My guess is that **Jesus** was panting from shortness of breath and his face was red and the blood vessels were standing-out in his neck and his eyes were bulging when he shouted out in **anger**:

*“Take these things away!  
You shall not make my Father’s House  
a house of trade!”*

While this was going on, I doubt that very many of the Biblically-literate religious leaders were thinking about the Hebrew Bible prophecy of **Malachi** who had written:

Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord. [Malachi 3:1-3]

Jesus was angry. Up in Black Mountain, folks would say He was mad as a hornet!

Did you catch the significance of today's story? The message of Jesus that Jesus acted out in the Temple for the religious institution was that Jesus was the Messiah, the One sent from God, and Jesus was calling the religious institution,  
the church,  
the corporate People of God,  
to the right worship of God.

I want to tell you something that I think is interesting. I preached on this passage at Fort Hill Church a few years after I had gone there. It was on Sunday, March 10, 1985, and I entitled the Exposition of Scripture, or the Sermon, "**The Temple of God.**" I had been the pastor of the congregation for about 5 years during which time we had bought an old bank building which is now called "*The Presbyterian Center.*" The context of that sermon in 1985 was that the Session had just three months earlier appointed a "Church Growth Committee." The purpose of the Committee was to help the congregation think through what we ought to do in terms of our church growth and our church buildings. At that point we were able to get a graduate class of architectural students at the University to help us wrestle with our problem.

When I preached on this "Angry Jesus" passage in 1985, my interpretation of the passage for Fort Hill Church was that *persons take precedence over buildings.* The good worship experience is more important than the setting or place of worship. Since 1985 was prior to our having a new sanctuary building which was built in 1989, I want you to understand that the sermon was not an "anti-building" sermon; it was a "Let's keep things in proper prospective" sermon.

Now you all know that one of the questions that you always ask in a good Bible study is this: "**Why did the Holy Spirit put this in the Bible?**"

Another way to ask the same question is this: **Why did God want the early church to remember this particular story about Jesus and his anger in the Temple?"**

Fred Craddock, a great Pastor and Teacher of the Christian Church [the denomination by that name] says that the early church remembered this story because **there existed in the early church after Jesus the very clear danger that the church was about to make the same mistake again: the early church was in the process of imprisoning the Holy Spirit in the STRUCTURE of the church just as the orthodox Jews wanted to imprison God in the STRUCTURE of the Temple.**

[cf: Craddock, Fred, John, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1982, p. 27]

What that is talking about is that the early church was beginning to be dominated by the church at Rome and was being solidified by rules and restrictions.

FOR INSTANCE: Only Latin can be used in the order of the worship service, not the common language of the people.

FOR INSTANCE: A baby who dies without the Sacrament of Holy Baptism will not go to heaven.

FOR INSTANCE: Only those who are ordained Minister of the Word are allowed to walk in the Chancel area.

FOR INSTANCE: There can be no ordination of women as church leaders; only men can be priests.

FOR INSTANCE: In order to properly celebrate Holy Communion, you must use unleavened bread and real wine.

The early church was in the process of imprisoning the Holy Spirit in the **structure** of the church just as the orthodox Jews in Jesus' day wanted to imprison God in the **structure** of the Temple.

So, the story of the “Angry Jesus” was told as a way of saying that

PERSONS TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER PLACES.

Do you think that that is true? PERSONS TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER PLACES.

*And what does this have to say about our economy?*

In his book Whistling in the Dark, Frederick Buechner has this to say about

the Season of Lent in which we find ourselves:

**Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for?**

**If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?**

**To hear yourself try to answer questions like these is to begin to hear something not only of who you are but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become. It can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it (JTR= “the Season of Lent”), something like Easter may be at the end.** (Buechner, Frederick, Whistling in the Dark, San Francisco, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988, p.74)

Living in the eighth century, 800 years after Jesus, in the Monastery of St. Sabas, some ten miles southeast of Jerusalem, not very far from the Dead Sea, one of the monks was named *JOHN OF DAMASCUS*. Because of his many abilities in philosophy and theology, he has long been referred to as one of the Fathers of the Early Church. He also composed many hymns which are still in use by the Church today. One of them says:

*Now let the heaven be joyful, Let earth her song begin;  
Let the round world keep triumph, And all that is therein;  
Let all things seen and unseen Their notes of gladness blend,  
For Christ the Lord hath risen, Our joy that hath no end.*

That hymn of John of Damascus is in our Presbyterian Hymnal, and following our Statement of Faith, we are going to sing it together.

