



We Don't Need the Building; Can We Gather in It Again Soon, Please?

March 7, 2021: The Third Sunday in Lent

The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment

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Oh Lord: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

As we all may be aware, today is the 1st Anniversary of the last Sunday that we gathered in person for worship. On Sunday, March 8, 2020, we prayed and sang and shared in the bread and cup, here, and in our beautiful chapel. We hugged and shook hands and gabbed without masks, while we shared in the 8th sacrament of coffee hour. So much has happened since then, it is hard to hold it all in our heads and hearts—grief, longing, anger, perhaps some gratitude.

And so maybe it is appropriate that we have Jesus displaying and acting out some very, very strong emotions this morning.

The so-called “Cleansing of the Temple” from John’s Gospel is one of the few actions by Jesus that is recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke AND John. There are no other parables, healings, or miracles that are in *all* four Gospels, except for the feeding of the five thousand. So, the cleansing of the Temple clearly put a profound stamp on the memories and imaginations of the early Christian communities.

The setting is the annual festival of the Passover, and Jerusalem is absolutely packed with 10s of 1000s of pilgrims who have come to fulfill their sacred obligation to make sacrifices at the Temple. Most pilgrims, especially poor ones, could not bring a sacrificial animal without blemish on a long perilous trip. So, they had to buy one when they arrived. And since it was blasphemous to pay for ones’ animal with a Roman coin (which had the idolatrous head of the emperor on it) one had to change the Roman coin into a shekel, both to pay the annual temple tax, and to buy an animal to sacrifice. One can easily imagine how prone this arrangement was to abuse. Who among us who has done some foreign traveling hasn’t been victim to exploitative exchange rates when we land at the airport; or likewise, who hasn’t found ourselves hungry in a tourist attraction, captive to the meager, overpriced snacks available?

The Temple was the heart not just of the religious life of Israel, but also its economic and political center. And at the time of the major festivals, commerce would have spilled out all over the Temple precincts. So Jesus is stepping into a crowded, powerful space, courtyards ringed by courtyards with the Temple rising up in the background at its heart.

Jesus seems very angry. Just imagine him, like some version of the Incredible Hulk, flinging over tables, coins clattering, clay containers shattering, papyri covered with numbers and calculations floating, styli and ink pots bleeding ink all over the dusty ground, animals braying and squawking and scattering, clerks shouting, pilgrims wondering, religious authorities taking notes. John’s version shows Jesus with a whip, like some Biblical Indiana Jones. It is an almost incomprehensible scene to us.

Scholars differ as to why Jesus was so angry. Some remind us of the important connection between righteous anger and deep love. Jesus’ fury was aimed at the exploitative excess that hurt the poor and destitute, who nonetheless were attempting to fulfill their religious obligations. Others say Jesus was



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attacking a religious institution drunk on its own power and wealth which had strayed from nurturing the religious heart of the Jewish tradition—to love God and neighbor, not merely perform ritual obligations. In this critique, Jesus stood in line with ancient prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah.

In any case, in his conversation with the Temple authorities, Jesus engages in the back and forth typical of what we see in the narrative flow of John's Gospel: Jesus makes a statement; his listeners misunderstand; clarification is provided for readers of the Gospel, and others who "get it" in the narrative.

This morning, when religious leaders ask Jesus about the authority, he has to do what he is doing, Jesus says to them: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Misunderstanding him, the leaders respond, "This Temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" The writer helpfully reminds us that Jesus is describing the temple of his body. Recall that this is taking place in front of the same Temple, surrounded by the same courtyards that many years previous, as a teenager, at another Passover, Jesus had also called it his Father's House, where for three days he had held his teachers spellbound, much to the chagrin of his worried parents. (Luke 2.41 ff)

And yet the Risen Jesus reminds us that we don't need a building to worship him. Jesus is describing what had become true for the early Christians, who were also Jews—the Temple wasn't necessary to worship God. Jesus was. God's presence wasn't limited to the confines of the Holy of Holies in the Temple. God was present in Jesus and Jesus was present in the Church as they prayed, celebrated the sacraments, and engaged in sacrificial love for one another and the wider world. Wherever two or three were gathered together in his name, he was there among them. It wasn't about a building, but about a relationship.

God teaches this same thing to the Israelites in the 10 Commandments, which we prayed together in the Penitential Order this morning. Given to the Israelites in the desert, the fleshpots of Egypt behind them, the promise of Canaan in front of them, with no single place in which to worship, the Commandments define a relationship. Historically, the Jewish tradition survived the destruction of 2 Temples. The study of Torah and the living out of the loving precepts taught therein became a sort of portable Temple that could take root anywhere and has. Though the destruction of the Temple was existentially cataclysmic, ultimately Judaism was not defined by the Temple. Judaism has survived.

Though we miss it, we are not defined by our building. We are defined by our relationship with Jesus, through our Baptismal Covenant, which can't be contained by any four walls, nor can our call to love one another and our neighbors. The worship of Jesus has been remarkably portable as well. If we have a landline, a smart phone, a tablet, a computer, a TV, we can be together in worship, because our primary relationship is with Jesus and with one another.

And yet, we do have to say that this is second best. We crave one another's company. We are incarnated beings. Christians need a place to gather in our bodies and sing together and gather around the Holy



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Table. And Zoom ain't it. And Facebook ain't it. It's a stop gap measure. It's a holding pattern. Yet we are so very grateful for the way that these platforms can hold us together, and even bring people to worship and fellowship who hadn't been able to gather with us. And this newly discovered and manifested capacity will continue and improve, even as we regather in person.

God in the desert; Jesus in the Temple: They remind us that while we hunger to be next to one another, we are not defined by any earthly structure or distance. While places are sacred, more sacred are our relationships with God and one another that can still be nurtured. While we are incarnated beings with earthly limitations, our spirits are forever and know no bounds.

And... please God, we want to be together again safely, soon.

Amen.