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John 2:13-22

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Jesus comes to us, Whip in hand

After Jesus took out his whip to cleanse the temple, the religious leaders asked him for his reasoning, and Jesus replied, “I will destroy this temple in three days and in three days I will raise it up,” after he was raised from the dead the disciples figured out that Christ’s body was the temple.

Speaking of the temple, I wonder where we find God. Not where is God, but where do we show up experience God’s presence and absense? I mean, we all have an answer, one that we often announce a the start of every worship service. That God is here among us. This is why we say that prayer of invocation, at the beginning of every worship service, invocation, is a fancy word for to call on, to ask the presence of God to dwell amongst us. But I am reminded that this prayer is a bit awkward because, as I look around me, I see empty pews. So I must turn to a less literal meaning of “God is here among us,” that God is here. In all of your homes, in the wires and server racks. This physical separation has taught me that God is bigger than I could have imagined. That my assumption that God could only meet us in a house of worship was wrong. God meets us where we are at. Nothing more and nothing less.

Our Gospel reading also brings the question, where does God dwell? And to all the Jewish onlookers and I think Jesus himself would have answered you, that God dwells in the temple. In the holy of holies within the deepest most sacred room on this planet. Isaiah proclaims, “this is what the Lord says, Heaven is my throne and earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? Or where will my place of repose be?” The Psalmist declares, “let us go to his dwelling place; let us worship at his footstool.”

Make no mistake, They also like us believed they could find God in the wonders of nature and everywhere they went. But the temple was special. In Celtic spirituality, they speak of thin places, as moments when one experiences the divine in a profound way. And to the Jewish people this temple must have been the thinnest place between the material world and the heavenly world.

And so, when Jesus comes to this thin place to meet God, he finds something that he does not like. He finds the whole place full of merchants and money-changers. The text does not tell us why Jesus had such a problem with them. Perhaps it was because they were extorting people or maybe the money made for sacrifices was not going to the needy. But regardless, Jesus grabs a whip and drives out the merchants, money changers and the animals. Because, the temple is not the temple if it is a marketplace. Because Jesus could not find God in a marketplace.

Would Jesus find God in our church?

This is an uncomfortable question. Because we'd like to say yes. But that would not be in the spirit of the Lentan holiday. Because Lent is about the journey into the wilderness where we figure out what is helpful and what is detrimental to our Christian journey. And more than that, we have been going through a lentan expenance for one year, minus a week. We have given up so much of what we thought was necessary for church to work. So perhaps we have a better idea now of what makes church so important to all of us.

So Jesus comes into our sanctuary, whip in hand. What does he drive out?

Surely the first thing Jesus would ask is if our worship preparing us to be God's hands and feet in the world or are we just worshipping for our own amusement?

This is an uncomfortable question because it is us pastors who are responsible for this. Do we teach the truth even when it is unpopular? Do we call people ot new ways of thinking and living in the world?

The scariest implication of John 2 is that Jesus cleansing the temple is a word against us. That Jesus would come and drive us out of the church because with us, the church is no longer a thin space. And let's be honest, we are all individuals, each with their own needs. People connect with God during different parts of worship. Some with prayer others with song. The point is that the church should always be ready to reform, to adapt so that it is meaningful to each new generation.

So where is God? Hmm. Perhaps God is that force at our backs, pushing us, comforting us, and guiding us forward in to the mystery. A Christ that turns over tables is a Christ that calls us to overturn a few of our own tables so that nothing can get in the way of us loving God and neighbor. Let us be free of anything that separates us from those goals.