

Raise Up

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, March 3, 2024, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [John 2:13-22](#) and [Psalm 19](#)

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Over the past few weeks, I've made pointed out various motifs in Mark's gospel. That's because we'll be spending most of this year in Mark's gospel. Today, however, we begin a three-week break from Mark to look at some passages from John's gospel. We'll be back to Mark for Easter. For now, a little journey into John's gospel.

The reading from John we just heard probably has some level of familiarity to most of you. At some point or other, you've heard about Jesus flipping over the money changers' tables. It's a common enough story that someone asked an AI machine to make an image of Jesus flipping over the tables in the temple. This is what the AI created.



If, when you heard the story read today, you felt something was a little off about it, that's probably because your familiarity with the story comes from your exposure to the story as told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In their versions of the story, there's no mention of a whip (though in the vast majority of the art depicting this story, Jesus has a whip). In their versions of the story, Jesus says the people changing money and selling animals for sacrifice have made the Temple into a "house of robbers" (when John's Jesus calls it "a marketplace"). And their versions of the story come on Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday is the start of Holy Week, the final week of Jesus' life. John is telling this story at the beginning of his narrative about Jesus. We're only in chapter 2 of John's gospel.

Let me sidetrack for a moment to talk about my approach to John's gospel. Metaphor, metaphor, metaphor! I don't think John was trying to write a historical document. John is a theological document. The stories John chooses to include are picked (and placed in the narrative) to make theological points. So, when I'm reading John, I'm asking myself, "What's the theological point John is trying to make?"

Because there's a story about Jesus flipping over tables in the Temple in all four gospels, I think it's likely that something like this happened in history. When did it happen? Given how challenging this action was to the status quo of "the way we do things" in the Temple and Pax Romana, I think it's much more likely to have happened toward the end of Jesus' life than to have happened two years earlier.

John mentions the Passover three times in his gospel: Here at the beginning; somewhere around the midpoint; and at the end, days before Jesus' execution. So that's two years for the story of Jesus' ministry to unfold in John's gospel. And the fact that John bookends his narrative with mention of the Passover suggests to me that there's a storytelling thing happening here – which is not important for today's sermon. What's important for today and for the next couple weeks is to remember that we're looking for a theological point or two.

"John organizes his Gospel around six miraculous 'signs' Jesus performs over the course of his public ministry. These function like signposts along the path, pointing toward primary themes John wants to emphasize about who Jesus is and what his mission is all about. The first of these signs is when Jesus, encouraged by his mother, surreptitiously turns water into wine during a wedding in Galilee. Today's passage comes immediately on the heels of that wedding story."¹ The wedding story proclaims that something new, something fine, something that doesn't follow conventional wisdom is dawning. In today's reading, we learn about what's at stake and about what it's going to take.

Let's go back to one of the differences I mentioned about John's version of the story. Instead of accusing those who are selling animals and exchanging money in the Temple courtyard of making the Temple into a "den of robbers," Jesus accuses them of changing it into a marketplace. Which might make you wonder, "Is Jesus against marketplaces?" I don't think so. As one commentary pointed out, "Jesus doesn't go around Galilee and Jerusalem denouncing local markets."² Something else is going on.

The money exchange and the animal sales were all done to make the longstanding sacrificial system run smoothly. I think Jesus' anger is focused not on marketplaces in general – or even on corruption in general. I think Jesus, here at the beginning of his ministry, is challenging the sacrificial system itself. "His actions seem to say: It's high time for that system to end, and for a new era to begin."³

Jesus is in Jerusalem for Passover. Passover is the Jewish festival that celebrates God's deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery. I think this makes the story a freedom story, at least at some level. It's interesting that none of the tellings of the story says that Jesus was angry when he "cleansed" the Temple. There's an assumption that, if he was flipping over tables, he must have been angry – even though neither Matthew, Mark, Luke, nor John say Jesus was angry.

¹ "Why Is Jesus Angry?" *Salt Project*, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/2/27/why-is-jesus-angry-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-3> (posted and accessed 27 February 2024).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

I wonder if this was planned street theater, an act of civil disobedience carried out dramatically to make a point. There's merit to the idea that, on Palm Sunday, Jesus' ride into Jerusalem on a donkey was an act of street theater. It's as if Jesus decided to make his point by acting out the words of the ancient prophet Zechariah: "Lo, your king comes to you ... humble and riding on a donkey" (Zech 9:9).

"Zechariah also speaks of a new age to come when the holiness associated with the temple will pervade the whole world, and "there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord" (Zech 14:21). The idea seems to be that the traders are part of a layer of separation between God and Israel that one day will be overcome. Thus Jesus driving the traders out of the temple, like his eventual arrival in Jerusalem on a donkey, is a kind of street theater declaring through action that the long-awaited new epoch has begun. Holiness will overflow conventional bounds, and the-temple-as-we-know-it will give way to a more widespread, accessible, direct mode of encountering God."⁴

After Jesus' street theater, the religious authorities demand Jesus prove to them he has the authority to do this. "What sign can you show us for doing this?" they ask. "In veiled and resonant language, Jesus proposes a sign the authorities mistakenly take at face value: 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' They think he's referring to brick and mortar, but in fact, John explains, 'he was speaking of the temple of his body.' Thus Jesus does at least three things at once: (1) he counters the religious authorities; (2) he cryptically predicts his death and resurrection, something his disciples realize only later, 'after he was raised from the dead'; and (3) he casts a revolutionary vision for worship in the new era. His body is the temple. Those who 'abide in him' (one of John's favorite themes; see 15:4) thereby abide in 'the house of the Lord.' This theme will surface again in Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman about worshiping God not in any specific location but rather 'in spirit and truth' (John 4:21-23).

"In other words, for John, Jesus' arrival signals the dawn of a new age, a new intimacy with God, a new conception of 'the temple' not as a building but as a person in spirit and truth, Jesus, God's Word made flesh. The old sacrificial system must end; there's no need for animals and blood and money changers; in fact, the old system only stands as an impediment to the new day. Drive out the traders! Zechariah's vision is fulfilled! Fashion a whip out of cords, let a thousand doves arise and scatter – for the hour has come!

"It's worth remembering here that the Gospel of John was written after the Roman armies had destroyed the Jerusalem Temple, a period when both Jews and early Christians were struggling to make sense of the world without what they had considered its sacred axis. Rabbinic Judaism eventually refigured 'the temple' in the home, and early Christians refigured 'the temple' as the body of Jesus, which is also the body of the church – and the body of, as John put it, the Logos, the Word made flesh, the pattern underlying the cosmic temple of creation."⁵

The Psalm reminds us that the heavens and all creation declare the glory of God. Poet and farmer Wendell Berry once said, "There are no sacred and unsacred places; there are only sacred and desecrated places." The Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

once warned that the quickest way to desecrate a place was to build a church on it – because the supposed ‘holy ground’ of the church would instantly imply that everything outside its doors is profane.⁶ (And sure enough, the word “profane” comes from the Latin for “outside the temple.”)

“Like the prophets before him, Jesus can be understood in this week’s passage as challenging our tendency to domesticate God into a temple or a church or a sacred system. In fact, all of creation shimmers with divine glory. When we go to church, we don’t step into God’s presence; rather, we step into a community that, at its best, helps call our attention to the fact that God is present everywhere, that the body of Jesus and the movement of the Spirit are boundless, and so that the temple’s architecture must extend all the way out – all the way to the expanding edges of the cosmos.”⁷

“Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” It is, I think, time to raise up the temple that is the body of Christ – not the body of Christ limited to the church, but the body of Christ that is creation itself.

“This earth indeed is the very Body of God,” writes Fr. Richard Rohr, “and it is from this body that we are born, live, suffer, and resurrect to eternal life. Either all is God’s Great Project, or we may rightly wonder whether anything is.”⁸

“Our very suffering now, our crowded presence in this nest that we have largely fouled, will soon be the one thing that we finally share in common. It might be the one thing that will bring us together politically and religiously. The earth and its life systems, on which we all entirely depend, might soon become the very thing that will convert us to a simple lifestyle, to a necessary community, and to an inherent and natural sense of the Holy.”⁹

May we raise up the body of Christ that is creation itself.

Amen.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Richard Rohr, “Creation as the Body of God,” *Daily Meditations*, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/creation-as-the-body-of-god-2022-01-21/> (posted 21 January 2022; accessed 2 March 2024).

⁹ Richard Rohr, “Creation as the Body of God,” *Daily Meditations*, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/creation-body-god-2016-11-09/> (posted 9 November 2016; accessed 2 March 2024).