

Lent 3, Year B – March 7, 2021

John 2:13-22

Epiphany, Winnipeg

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It's a confusing kind of a story. Sure, we might think it's simple. Jesus comes into one of the courts on the outer edges of the temple and sees people selling cattle and sheep and doves. That probably seems kind of weird to us. Then he flies into a non-Jesus-ish rage, and makes a commotion and turns over tables and pours out the merchants' money and drives out all the sellers and tells them to stop making his Father's house a market, an emporium. All that fuss and commotion – that doesn't seem right..... Maybe the whole thing is about corrupt religion or works-righteousness. Or depending on your own political slant it's about the evils of consumerism or materialism or capitalism or socialism or religion for sale. Or if it's not about any of those things, maybe some of us just scratch our heads and wondered why Jesus was so angry.

But there's more to the story than Jesus' anger. It might be interesting to you to know that the people selling cattle and sheep and doves in the temple are just providing something essential to worshipers who come there. If you travelled to Jerusalem to go to the temple to pray and to worship it was required that you offer an animal as a sacrifice. It's just what you did; no need to judge it, it was just a different world. If you had money you would pay for and offer livestock, like maybe sheep. If you were poor you could still make an offering of a couple of small affordable doves and meet the same religious obligation. That's exactly what Jesus' parents did when he was an infant and they took him to the temple: They presented him to God, and they offered two small affordable doves as a sacrifice.

So when Jesus arrived at the temple that day, what he saw going on was just something that was perfectly normal in the history and tradition of his own people,

his ancestors, his parents, his community. Yes, he's critical and he's angry and there's got to be something behind all that and it's been the topic of every sermon I've ever preached on this...and I suppose it will be again some time. We'll see what's up in three years...

But there's something more than Jesus' anger going on in the story. Watch what happens: the religious leaders take him aside and say, "What are you doing? What's your point?" Jesus says, "Destroy all this, and I'll build it up in three days," and of course they have no idea what he's talking about. Who would? But he's not talking about rebuilding bricks and mortar. He's talking about his own death and resurrection. Right here and right from the start he makes it clear that it's all about his dying and rising: it's all about the life he will lose and be given back; it's all about the life that he is giving for God's beloved world.

It's as though he's saying, "If this temple is destroyed, I will still be raised from the dead and all that life will be given for you. If everything that seemed normal and right and proper is gone, turned over, driven out, I will still be raised from the dead, and my life will be given, given back to me, given for the whole world that God so dearly loves." Look through the whole story: every healing Jesus performs, every argument he has, every foot he washes and every crowd he feeds with fish and bread...every laugh that bursts out over new wine at a wedding at Cana, every tear shed at the graveside of a friend...everything that happens in this whole sweep of Jesus' living and dying and rising again, points to that news that he will be raised up, and all life...all life...will be made new.

At the heart of this story that seems so angry is actually this gentle good news of life and this gentle good news of God among us, the Word Become Flesh

as we sometimes call Jesus. At the heart of this story with so much disruption and chaos in that corner of the temple is this gentle good news of life that will not be stopped by any amount of violence or fear or chaos. “When this temple is destroyed....I will raise it up in three days.” And life will have the last word.

So look through this whole story that is our life, or the life of the world. I don't need to make up a list of the losses and worries and troubles. But if everything that seemed normal and right and proper is gone, turned over, driven out, the life that the risen Jesus gives for the whole beloved world is still promised and given. Look through the whole story; your story, our story, over all the sweep of time, even right now: every illness and every healing, every war and fragile peace....every laugh that bursts out at a wedding or a party, every tear shed at the graveside of a friend, even when no more than ten are allowed to gather...every disagreement and every reconciliation, every meal shared and every ounce of hunger, every injustice and every protest on the street....every annual meeting.... Everything that happens in this whole sweep of the human story...Right in the thick of it all is this word of Jesus that this life will always be spoken. You just can't stop it.

Sometimes that word is loud and clear, like in a temple courtyard on a sunny afternoon. Sometimes that word is dead quiet, like on a cross on a hillside. But through this whole story that we are a part of there is this gracious word that it's all about life; the life of Jesus for the life of this whole beloved world. AMEN.

