

LENT 2021
The Journey to Jerusalem
“The Centrality of Worshiping Jesus ”
John 2:13-22
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Why are you here this morning? I’m not asking you that as a rhetorical question. I want you to take a moment to think about the reason you came to church today. Why we’re here is a fitting question to wrestle with, especially during this season of Lent, when followers of Jesus have historically stripped away stuff, so they can more fully fix their eyes on Jesus.

Physical structures have always been important for worship. We read in Genesis 22 that Abraham constructed an altar to worship God. When Moses first asked Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery, he requested permission to leave Egypt so God’s people could go into the wilderness where they could offer sacrifices in worship to God. After the Israelites escaped Egypt God met with Moses on Mount Sinai and the Israelites were instructed not to touch the mountain, because God’s presence dwelt there. Later the Jewish people constructed a Tent of Meeting and a tabernacle and eventually built the temple in Jerusalem as a sacred place of worship where God’s presence dwelt. Since the 4th Century Christians have constructed cathedrals, temples, sanctuaries, meeting houses and churches as places of worship.

I share that brief history with you about places of worship, because in today’s Scripture passage, Jesus was in the Jerusalem temple—the Jews’ sacred place of worship—with people all around Him and He acted in a way that was very uncharacteristic of Him. He made a whip and drove people out of the temple area; He overturned the tables of money changers, scattering coins everywhere; and, speaking of animals being sold, He said, *“Get these out of here!”* Jesus’ actions that day have typically been viewed as a statement about the sacredness and holiness of the temple. The concept of the sacredness of worship space has carried over to our day. Have you heard statements like these? *“Don’t run in church. This is God’s house.”* *We shouldn’t sell tickets to the chicken BBQ dinner. This is a holy place.”* *“Make sure you wear nice clothes to church and look happy and speak in a quiet voice—like you do at the library—because the church is a sacred place.”* In support of the idea that places of worship are holy, John

chapter 2 does point out that after Jesus' rampage, the disciples remembered the words of the Psalmist from Psalm 69 verse 9, "*Zeal for your house will consume me.*" That's how they made sense of what Jesus did that day, but I'm quite sure there was more going on that day than Jesus simply protecting a sacred building, because Jesus wasn't one to strictly adhere to religious rules and regulations. He drove the religious leaders of his day crazy by insisting on healing on the Sabbath and allowing his disciples to pluck heads of grain and eat them on Israel's holy day. He consistently ignored cultural taboos by speaking to women in public and allowing them to touch Him; by interacting with sinful people and even going into their homes to eat; and, by denouncing the Pharisees and other religious leaders in front of their followers.

Last week I pointed out that the Romans had Jesus crucified, in large part, because they believed He might be a dangerous rebel who would upset the equilibrium of the Roman Empire. Jesus was a rebel, but not a political renegade looking to militarily overthrow Caesar. He was a rebel when it came to following Jewish religious rules.

Follow along as I read our Gospel text for today—John chapter 2 verses 13-22.

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" His disciples remembered that it is written: "*Zeal for your house will consume me.*"

The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?"

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.
John 2:13-22

Today is the third Sunday of Lent—can you believe Easter is just 4 weeks away? Our Lenten sermon series is titled, "The Journey to Jerusalem," because as I read over the lectionary Gospel readings, I noticed that in all of them Jesus pointed toward his upcoming crucifixion. The cross was in the background of all Jesus said and did throughout his 3 & a ½ years of ministry. Focusing so heavily on the cross may seem kind of morbid to us, because we don't like to think

about death, but for Jesus, death was never far from his mind, and this focus shaped his life, leading Him to a posture of surrender and providing Him with God's perspective. Once again in today's Scripture passage, Jesus' speaks of his rapidly approaching death.

Turning over the money-changers' tables and clearing the temple with a whip was a seminal moment in Jesus' life and ministry and it's recorded by all 4 Gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. John records this event in the 2nd chapter of his account, while the other Gospel writers put it near the end of Jesus' life, just before his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. John's placement of this event at the beginning of his Gospel has led to speculation that perhaps Jesus cleared the temple on 2 occasions. It seems more likely that John was exercising his prerogative as an author and chose to write about this event at the outset of his account, rather than placing it in its chronological spot. Some of the other Gospel writers, particularly Mark, approach their Gospel in a way that shares stories from Jesus' life and then relies on the reader to make a decision about whether or not they think Jesus is God's Son. John, on the other hand, makes it clear from the start of his Gospel about Jesus' identity, so it makes sense that John would place this significant event early in his account about Jesus.

At the beginning of this passage we're told that it was almost Passover—the most important festival in the Jewish year. Passover was a celebration of God's deliverance of the Israelites from Pharaoh's hand in Egypt. On the night the Israelites eventually left Egypt the Angel of Death killed the first-born children and livestock of all the Egyptians, but the Israelites who put the blood of a sacrificed lamb above their doorposts were spared, as the Angel of Death passed over their homes. It was this event that finally compelled Pharaoh to release God's people from their slavery. That Jesus' clearing of the temple occurred near Passover is significant, because at Passover pilgrims from all over the world flocked to Jerusalem to celebrate God's deliverance. The city and the temple area were flooded with people.

Mark's Gospel records Jesus going into the temple courts on the evening before He cleared the temple to look around and then He walked back to Bethany where He was staying with his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Jesus' actions in the temple weren't impulsive. He wasn't having a bad day and in the spur of the moment decided to take out his frustration on people and animals that were in his way. No, what Jesus saw happening in the temple court

area greatly disturbed Him and it had probably weighed heavily on Him for a long time. As we look at the layout of the temple I hope we'll be able to get a clearer picture of what was taking place that upset Jesus so much.

The temple was the place where Jews and converts to Judaism came to worship and a significant aspect of their worship was offering animal sacrifices—oxen, sheep, goats and doves for those who couldn't afford larger animals. Many of the pilgrims who came to the temple during Passover had traveled a long distance, so it wasn't practical for them to bring their animal sacrifices with them. Provision had been made for worshipers to buy animals and birds they were going to sacrifice in the temple court area. I'm sure this started out as a well-intended act of service for traveling pilgrims, but by Jesus' day it had grown into a profitable industry. Jerusalem merchants realized that with a little collaboration among themselves the merchants could charge whatever price they agreed to, because what other options did the pilgrims have but to pay what was asked of them? And their high price was well worth it, because these animals were being purchased for worship. Didn't God deserve their best? By Jesus' day, what began as a helpful practice had turned into extortion with the end result that the temple court area had become a loud, distraction filled marketplace where people coming to worship God were being taken advantage of.

The layout of the temple clearly marked the divisions within Jewish worship. Within the building, labelled "the temple," was the main worship area—reserved for Jewish men—and an area designated as the "Holy of Holies," where God's presence dwelt and where only the High Priest could enter once a year to offer sacrifices on behalf of the nation of Israel. In a separate walled off area outside of the temple, but still within the confines of the temple was the "Women's Court." The Jewish religion was highly patriarchal. Women were permitted to worship, but not in the temple area with men. Outside the temple area itself, but still within the confined walls of the temple area was the "Court of the Gentiles" or the temple courts. This area was for Gentile or non-Jewish converts to Judaism. Many of those worshiping in this area were pilgrims who travelled a great distance to worship in Jerusalem. It was this area that over time had developed into a marketplace where buying and selling of animals for sacrifice occurred. Not only was this the only place the Gentiles could worship, everyone going into the

Women's Court or the temple had to pass through this area to get to their place of worship. Passing through the temple courts wasn't conducive to preparing one's heart for worship.

This wasn't the first time Jesus had visited the temple, but on this day He determined to call attention to the inappropriateness of what was taking place. I'll read verses 14-16 again:

In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!"

What was it that made Jesus upset? Was it the desecration of God's temple? Was it the distraction that made it difficult for people to worship God? Both of those were true in part, but I believe Jesus' primary grievance was that everything that was taking place was getting in the way of people—particularly women and foreigners who were traveling from a distance—being able to worship God. Jesus wasn't primarily concerned about the desecration of the temple; He was upset that worshipers we're being blocked from worshiping God.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus consistently displayed anger when He sensed rules and regulations and traditions were given priority over people and when these rules and rituals and traditions made worshiping God more difficult. Take Matthew chapter 23 as an example. In verses 13-33 Jesus harshly denounced the teachers of the law and the Pharisees for blocking people in their efforts to worship God. Listen to these indictments...

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.

In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Matthew 23:13-33

If you ever wonder why Jesus was crucified by the Jewish religious leaders, read Matthew chapter 23 again.

Jesus consistently opposed the religious leaders when He sensed they were blocking people’s way to God and there are numerous examples of this throughout the New Testament, but a summary statement for Jesus’ philosophy of the relationship between people and religious rituals is found in Mark chapter 2 verse 27. Jesus directed these words to the Pharisees when they said his disciples were breaking the Sabbath by picking heads of grain and eating them. His response was, “*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*” Mark 2:27 We weren’t created to follow rules. Religion and its rituals, rules and traditions were made to assist people in worshiping God and being in relationship with Him.

After Jesus cleared the temple, He had the following exchange with the Jewish leaders. . The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”

Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. John 2:18-22

The Jews wanted to know who Jesus thought He was that He could do what He did in the temple. Jesus answered them, but they had no clue what He was saying. He equated his body with the temple and said, “*Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.*” They of course, thought He was referring to the physical temple and they used this statement during Jesus trial to convince the Jewish ruling body, the Sanhedrin, that He was guilty of wanting to overthrow their religion by destroying their place of worship. Later, after Jesus was raised to life, the disciples understood Jesus was speaking about his own body and what would happen to Him when He was crucified and raised to life.

I titled today’s sermon, “The Centrality of Worshiping Jesus,” because Jesus’ prophetic act in the temple just before He was arrested and crucified wasn’t just a statement for the Jews

of Jesus' day. Jesus pointed all of us to the heart of worship. Worship isn't ultimately about rituals, rules and traditions; these are simply tools, designed to assist us in worshiping Jesus. It's so easy and tempting for us to get caught up in details surrounding worship of Jesus—things like the condition of our building, how nice the grounds look, the choice of songs we sing during worship or the quality of the pastor's sermon. We focus on how we look and what clothes we wear. We judge a church's ministries based on how favorably or unfavorably they compare with other churches, or perhaps how kind or educated or engaging the pastoral staff is. It's tempting to focus on a lot of externals, but the centrality of all we do here is worshiping Jesus—fixing our eyes on Him, surrendering ourselves to Him and allowing Him to transform our lives. Ultimately, Jesus' actions in the temple that day weren't about protecting a sacred place or making a statement of some kind. He was demonstrating the priority He placed on all people being able to worship God without impediment.

Let's return to the question I asked us as we began today, "*Why are you here this morning?*" Many of us probably came here for a variety of reasons, but I can tell you that God's heart for you and my desire for you, is that you're primarily here to fix your eyes on Jesus—to meet with Him and to experience his love and his life transformation. Lent—the 6 & a ½ weeks prior to Easter—has historically been a time for followers of Jesus to fix our eyes on Him, remembering his suffering and the sacrifice He made for us. Today, as we move to our time of response, I invite you to focus on the centrality of worshiping Jesus, not just when you're in church, but in all your life.