

Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

Thus John the Evangelist tells the story often called the *Cleansing of the Temple*, one of the most familiar episodes in the New Testament, as it is one of only a handful of events in Jesus's life recounted in all four Gospels. In the next few minutes, I would like to explore the nuances that make this reading so appropriate for the Third Sunday of Lent and the midpoint in our journey to Jerusalem, the Cross, and the Empty Tomb.

While the essence of the story is the same in all four Gospels, John's version has many differences from the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John's version is the most detailed. Luke spends only one sentence describing the scene with no reference to money-changers or animals. Matthew and Mark aren't much longer and mention only overturning the money-changers tables and the seats of those who sold doves. John, in contrast, paints a more detailed active picture, adding cattle and sheep to the marketplace menagerie, and describing Jesus pouring out the coins of the money-changers before overturning their tables.

John's additional details require us to ponder the cultural and ritual context for this story. The money-changers and the sellers of cattle, sheep and doves were not just merchants making a profit, they were providing what most would have considered an essential service. The Greek or Roman coins used in daily commerce were not acceptable for paying the annual half-shekel Temple tax required of all adult males, so the merchants were exchanging currency for the convenience of worshippers. Similarly, Jewish law required that only animals without blemish could be offered in ritual sacrifice. It would be hard for most people to travel to Jerusalem with the necessary animals, so the merchants were providing a service necessary to meet the requirements of the Torah. Of course then as now, good intentions and essential services can often be used as excuses for overcharging or effectually robbing people, especially the poor.

The details that John adds to the story are also more violent. Only John mentions Jesus making a whip of cords and using it to drive all of them out of the temple while screaming "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" This is not Jesus, the meek and mild teacher, or the humble good shepherd pictured in our stained-glass window. This is Jesus the zealous prophet pronouncing judgement.

John also adds more allusive context, linking Jesus's sudden violent action to more Old Testament prophets. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have Jesus quoting Isaiah: "My house shall be a house of prayer" and linking it to Jeremiah's accusation that the hypocritical Israelites had turned the Temple into "a den of robbers." John instead has Jesus alluding to Zechariah: "There shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day."

Perhaps most interesting of all is where John's Gospel places Jesus's actions in the timeline of his life. In the synoptic Gospels, these events occur during Holy Week, after Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and before the Last Supper, the trial, and crucifixion. Indeed, in those versions, Jesus's Temple action appears to be what led the authorities to arrest him. In John, the cleansing of the Temple occurs in Chapter 2: it is not the climax but the beginning of Jesus's ministry, and in fact these are his first notable public words and actions, preceded only by his first miracle, quietly turning water into wine during the wedding feast in Cana.

It makes quite a difference in our understanding of who Jesus is when we see him start not as a teacher who uses enigmatic stories to enthrall the crowds but as a prophet performing what N.T. Wright calls “an acted parable of judgment.”ⁱ Jesus enacts a sudden symbolic destruction of the whole system. With no acceptable coins, there is no tax to support the Temple priests. With no acceptable animals, there is no ritual sacrifice. With no ritual sacrifice, the rationale for the Temple no longer exists. Jesus is not simply cleansing the Temple but destroying it. He is not a reformer but a revolutionary.

Taken in this perspective, Jesus’s response when asked for a sign for taking these actions is not a non-sequitur. He is indeed symbolically destroying the Temple and replacing it with Himself and making even more radical claims of authority. If amidst the shrieks of the money-changers and the animals anyone had missed Jesus calling the House of the Lord “My Father’s House,” they might be reminded of it now, when he claims to rebuild the Temple, a role historically reserved for kings. It was Solomon who built the first Temple, and Herod who in starting to rebuild the second hoped to cement his claims to be a legitimate king of the Jews. Which takes us to the end of John’s Gospel and Pilate’s question to Jesus “Are you the King of the Jews?” and then the mocking inscription he places on the cross: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”

So who is Jesus? A performer of miracles? A healer? A teacher? The good shepherd? Prophet? Priest? King? Or all of these and much more? Like the disciples, we can’t truly recognize or understand who Jesus is until we remember the whole story, not just pieces of it. In that sense the most resonant part of this passage from John may be its last verse: “After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.”

On the first Sunday of Lent, Haywood invited us to undertake a thought-experiment: suppose we had not been baptized and were taking steps during these 40 days to prepare for it. How do we ready ourselves to join the baptismal covenant? Who do we believe Jesus is? Do we recognize the truth about who God is, who we are, what God has to do with us, and what we have to do with each other? Are we ever among the money changers and merchants, profiting on good intentions in ways that emphasize superficial right ways of doing things and that block full and open access to God’s presence?

The baptismal covenant begins with a statement of belief, but from belief must follow perseverant actions: resisting, repenting, returning, proclaiming, seeking, serving, striving for justice, and respecting the dignity of every human being. And most of all, acknowledging as we do in today’s collect that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves, but can only keep the covenant with God’s help. *Amen.*

ⁱ N.T. Wright. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997: p.416.