

March 7, 2021
The Third Sunday in Lent
Year B
John 2:13-22
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship during the Coronavirus Pandemic
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Behold, the Lamb of God

Have you ever lost your temper? Have you ever snapped, lost your cool, thrown a fit, blown a gasket, flown into a rage, gone ballistic?

Perhaps there are some even keeled people listening to this sermon, who can honestly say that there's never been a time when they've flown off the handle, but for the rest of us, people who have had their displays of temper, today's gospel reading might seem like a word of encouragement, might seem like it's giving us permission for our rages, for the times when we snap, for the times when we throw a fit.

For me, it's for the times when I use the "scary Mommy voice" which doesn't come out very often, but when it does, leads to instantly more cooperative kids, but also leads to me having a sore throat for the next few hours and, depending on the degree of provocation, leads to me having a sense of disappointment in myself, that I don't have a healthier way of dealing with misbehaving children.

Still, I could, we all could in those moments when we've pitched a tantrum, take a glance at today's gospel reading and say to ourselves, "Well, maybe it's not so bad that I've lost my temper. After all, look at Jesus in today's gospel reading. He looks like he's in a rage."

The picture that we have of Jesus in today's gospel reading is not our most familiar picture of Jesus. We tend to see him in this gospel reading as an angry, intimidating, even frightening, whip wielding Jesus, driving men and animals out of the Temple courtyard, with a ferocity that must have confused and terrified everyone who was there on that day.

When we think of Jesus, sometimes he's on the cross, suffering for others, sometimes he's gently holding children, sometimes he's breaking bread with his disciples, sometimes he's in prayer, sometimes he's teaching the crowds, sometimes he's holding a lamb, as the one who seeks the lost, as the one who is the good shepherd.

In today's gospel reading we've been taught to see him as incensed, almost out of control, even violent, an angry Jesus, driving the animal sellers and the money changers out of the Temple.

We might think that what made Jesus so angry in this scene was the mere fact that all of this commercial activity was taking place, in the Temple courtyard, the court of the gentiles, which was still the public space of the Temple.

Beyond that there was the Court of Women, meaning, of course, only Jewish women, and then the Court of Men, meaning, of course, only Jewish men, and then the Altar, the Temple, itself, and the inner court, where only priests could go, and then the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest could go. The marketplace of Temple sacrifice was far away from where the actual worship of God would take place, but was it still too close for Jesus?

For most of my life, my understanding of this story focused on one thing, the righteous indignation and anger of Jesus summed up in his words, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

But is that a correct interpretation? Was the monetization of the religion of his people the main reason that Jesus acted the way that he did in the Temple?

You see, what was going on at the Temple was not a replacement of the religious life of the Jewish people, it was, in fact, necessary to the proper functioning of the religious life of the Jewish people. A strong argument could be made that the animal sellers and the money changers in the Temple were offering a service to those who came to Jerusalem to worship God and to be purified by ritual sacrifice before celebrating the Passover.

Because Roman coins had pagan images on them, it was necessary to change them into Jewish shekels before you paid the Temple tax, since nothing with a graven image on it could be placed in the Temple coffers. So, money changers were necessary.

Also, it was actually more convenient to purchase an animal for sacrifice at the Temple itself, rather than have to drag it all the way to Jerusalem in order to make a sacrifice. One could say that just purchasing an animal for sacrifice wasn't as meaningful or authentic a worship experience as bringing one of your own herd for the sacrifice, but one should probably not say that unless one has had the experience of walking with one's family and one's sacrificial animals fifty miles through the Israeli countryside.

On its surface, there was nothing inherently evil going on at the Temple. This buying and selling wasn't disrupting the worship of God, which would have been going on several courts in from where this scene takes place. So, the question remains: Why was Jesus so angry?

Well, since the Romans had taken over, the priests in the Temple were less servants of God, and more servants of Rome. To be fair to them, it was probably in order to make keep the peace and to maintain the religious life of their people, which was centered around sacrificial worship at the Temple, that the priests had made concessions to the Roman Empire, that gave the Romans so much control over the activity at the Temple.

The Romans were allowed to patrol and tax the Temple marketplace, to an extent that the Temple worshipers were financially exploited in their efforts to participate in the worship life of their people, and the animal sellers, and the money changers, and even the priests themselves benefited from the exploitation of the people, rich and poor, but mostly poor, who came to practice their faith.

So, Jesus, who said, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come,

follow me,” and who said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,” and who said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God”, might have decided that those structures of Temple worship that had become corrupted by pagan rulers and human greed had to be stopped.

So, he drove them out.

What Jesus might have seen on that day in the Temple was the religious exploitation of spiritually and economically vulnerable people.

But on the other hand, believing that all of the people who were involved in the work of the Temple marketplace, the animal sellers, the money changers, the priests who oversaw the whole process, were corrupt and deserving of Jesus’ wrath, is a bit harsh and undoubtably unjustified.

We might look back on this scene and see people creating barriers that made it harder for people to worship God, but the people who were actually engaged in the process, would have understood themselves as making it possible for people to worship God appropriately, in accordance with the laws and traditions of their people.

Perhaps we need fresh eyes on this story, eyes that look at it anew from the very beginning of it. We see in this story, Jesus in a fit of passionate anger, driving people and animals out of the Temple. But much as it might seem to be, this is not a story about the righteous wrath of God, expressed in the anger of the incarnate word of God, Jesus. And much as it might seem to be, this is not a story that justifies or celebrates violence even for a righteous cause.

At the very beginning of the story Jesus comes to the Temple and sees the Temple marketplace. But what Jesus did next is important. He did not charge into the Temple court, grab a whip from one of the animal sellers, and start knocking over tables and chasing people out of the Temple.

He sat down and made a whip of cords.

This would not have been a quick process. We do not find here the losing of temper. During the process of making the whip, Jesus had time to cool down, to think about his next steps, to breathe deeply, to decide if what he was about to do was really what he wanted to do.

As much as the short-fused people among us might want to find in this story Jesus modeling a temper tantrum for us, that's not what we find. Jesus had time to decide what he wanted to do and when he finished creating his whip, he still created chaos in the Temple marketplace, driving animals and people out and overturning the tables of the moneychangers.

This story could partially be about economic exploitation going on at the Temple, but certainly, that's not all it's about, or even predominantly what it's about. This story is, at its heart, about the love of God, expressed in the sacrifice of Emmanuel, God with us, Jesus.

When Jesus drove the animal sellers and the money changers out of the Temple, the text tells us that he also drove out the sheep and the cattle and had the doves taken out of the temple courtyard too. Worship at the Temple would have come to a standstill because there was nothing left to sacrifice.

Nothing except the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus, the Lamb of God, with the dust settling around him, in the shocking stillness after the storm, remained in the Temple, as God's perfect sacrifice, for the sake of his people.

Jesus, the dwelling place of God, would die for those who had defied and defiled him.

Jesus would die for those he had just driven out of the Temple, for those who had sold their soul, for the sake of power, for the sake of money, for the sake of the illusion of safety, that they would buy at any price. Jesus would die for them, because Jesus came to seek the lost, even those who did not know they were lost,

even those who thought they had everything, even those who thought they were the closest to God.

And Jesus, the Lamb of God, would die for us;

for us who sacrifice justice for convenience,

for us whose comforts trample on the poor

in ways we are not even willing to consider,

for us, whose resentment of those who have more than us, fills our lives with bitterness,

for us, whose confidence in our own righteousness,

turns us away from recognizing our need for the savior standing in our midst,

for us whose anger,

born of impatience, and resentment, and bitterness,

justifies acts of violence of action, committed by us or done in our name,

violence of speech, that tears down instead of building up,

and violence of attitude that floods our lives and the lives of others with a persistent negativity...

It is for them, and it is for us that Jesus stands in the temple, in the stillness after the storm, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world prepared for the sacrifice, for us and for all; inviting all who his holiness, all who his righteousness, has driven out of the Temple made by human hands. Inviting us to come, to be cleansed, to be made holy, in the Temple of his body. Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.