

Faith Under Construction

John 2: 13-22

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰ The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² 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.

Imagine we are in the temple. It’s Passover season. The crowd’s energy is festive. A sense of holiness hangs in the air. Small business entrepreneurs have set up their stands, as this week’s profits will feed their families for months to come. Then, all of a sudden, someone—we know it’s Jesus—starts yelling. He’s tossing tables and damaging personal property. He’s releasing caged animals and cracking a whip like a lion tamer. He is obviously quite upset. Full of zeal and angry grief over the scene he is watching in front of him.

Start by wondering: what makes Jesus so angry? Maybe we say injustice. Perhaps we name exclusion or the exploitation of the poor. Or even the commodification of creation. All of that seems true, especially in the other gospel accounts of Jesus’ anger in the temple. But when we look under the hood of John’s gospel, Jesus’ pistons get fired up for another reason. Typically, this passage is subtitled “Jesus cleanses the temple.” But he isn’t cleansing it. He’s desacralizing it. John’s gospel wants us to know that as meaningful as the temple is, and as central as the temple is to Israel’s story of faith, God’s Spirit doesn’t dwell in a place, but in a person. “Tear down this temple,” Jesus says, “and I will rise it up in three days.”

Now we would all probably agree with Jesus that our place, or our building, isn’t the point, right? Even though we spend more time, energy and dollars on our church structures than on anything else; and even though it is the building most churches put on their bulletin covers and home pages of their websites, we would probably all agree that it’s not what makes us a church. It’s the people. I think one thing we’ve learned these days is that just because we aren’t in the building doesn’t mean we stop being the church body. During the pandemic we have been forced to see that it’s not the building that brings us together, but God’s Spirit who dwells

in us even by way of our computers and iPhones, and, most of all, in the sacred relationships we've built and maintained with one another.

Last week it tickled me when someone said that what amazes them about Sunday services on Zoom is how y'all talk before worship begins. "How was your doctor's appointment?" Or "How is your mom doing this week?" Or "Did you get your shot yet?" The connections we continue to build, the way we weave into one another's lives even during a time when connecting is difficult, is a beautiful witness to the church's resilience. I mean, we can take pride in successful capital campaigns and get excited about renovations, but at the end of the day we know that what makes us a church isn't the place, it's the people.

So we know Jesus isn't talking literally about building makeovers when he says what he says. But the crowd looks up and sees the scaffolding around the temple brick and they say, "The temple has been under construction for decades! How can you say you can rebuild it in 72 hours?" Any of us who have done a Do It Yourself project knows any building project takes a lot longer than that! I mean, how many trips to Lowes does rebuilding a temple take? But we read that Jesus isn't talking about masonry work, he's speaking about resurrection. The moment when the impossible becomes possible. When God's love opens up a new creative reality.

You see, I wonder if what makes Jesus so angry is that when we build our faith on the bricks of places and doctrines, rituals and yes, on sentences in scripture. We end up trapping God in our own self-constructed towers, which only ends up making God smaller, NOT bigger. What if Jesus is about shaking the foundations of our certainty and putting cracks in our fortified faith so God can continue to pry us more open to where God's presence is in our world. "Tear down this temple," Jesus says, "and I will rebuilt it in three days!"

Have you ever had a moment when your understanding of God changed? A moment where faith expanded because our foundations had been shaken and the things we once held as absolutes buckled under the weight of holy mystery?

I remember I took world religion's course in college. I was dipping my toe in the religious world. During one of the weeks, our guest speaker was an Iman from the local mosque. The class was filled with what I assumed were Christians, only because many had made it clear that we were not going to be converted—as if considering another faith's perspective was somehow cheating on Jesus.

When the Iman walked in, a hush fell over the room as our stereotypes of who he was swirled around him. Except, as he began to share his story, our stereotypical bubbles popped one at a time. He was warm and told jokes that were funny. He spoke about how his community was raising money for the struggling Baptist church down the street. And those of us whose basic understanding was that Jesus was the only way, truth, and life to God...well, cracks began to show up in our foundations. Questions arose such as: how could this kind, generous, joyful soul ever be condemned by a Christian God, when the truth was he was technically more of a Christian than we were?

Then someone asked him, half-jokingly and half serious I think, if he was really there to convert us—clearly a projection of what we were often taught to do in the Christian faith. And it was here that his answer shook me to my core. He said, “I have absolutely no interest in converting you. But what I do have interest in is supporting you to be the best Christian, the best Jew, the best Buddhist, the best Hindu, the best human being you can be because our world desperately needs you right now.” In the moment I remember feeling an angry kind of grief rising up in me, because I had wished that my experience of Christianity taught the same thing as his taught him.

Looking back, I now realized that I wasn’t experiencing a crisis of faith. I was experiencing a rebuilding of it, a growing of it, a resurrection of it. “Tear down this temple,” says Jesus, “and I will rise it up in three days.”

Lent is a time when God’s Spirit does some renovating on us. It is a time when we dig a little deeper, realizing that our faith continues to expand, and is always under construction. May we allow Christ to continue to shake our foundations. Clearing a space for something stronger and truer to rise up in its place. Amen.