



Sunday March 7, 2021
John 2:13-22 (Third Sunday in Lent)

Pastor Tony Acompanado

Spring Cleaning

I'd like you to take a moment to imagine yourself as the famous television painter, Bob Ross." C'mon, you remember him don't you – the one who starred on the instructional PBS show, *The Joy of Painting*. The one with the gentle voice, calm demeanor, and trademark afro hairstyle. The one who often used signature expressions such as "*happy little trees and clouds*" or "*we don't make mistakes, just happy little accidents.*" And if you could imagine yourself as him, then I wonder how you would paint Jesus in today's gospel story?

I'm guessing it might go a little bit like this: "*Here let's put a happy little smile on Jesus. And, then let's paint a nice little white robe on him. Then maybe we'll add a nice fluffy beard, and some soft, curly hair. And then – well, we have to be sure to give him a happy little whip over here to cleanse the Temple with. And maybe we'll scatter some coins here and there and even put a scared little cow over there.*"

Yep, just like that, right?! Okay, maybe not quite *that* extreme, but for most of us, our preferred image of Jesus is often reflective of a Bob Ross painting – friendly and approachable, good with children...nice. Most often we like the stories of Jesus being welcoming and non-judgmental, curing the sick and injured, advocating for the oppressed and eating with tax collectors and sinners.

But in today's gospel text – in this story of Jesus cleansing the Temple – the Jesus we encounter is anything *but* gentle and nice. We're told that he's furiously running around with a whip in his hand, driving people and animals out of the temple, pouring out the coins of the money changers and overturning their tables. Quite honestly this image of Jesus has always been a bit unsettling for me for all the reasons I named earlier, and it makes me wonder if anyone else might be feeling a bit uncomfortable about this image of Jesus as well.

At first glance it seems like our gracious and loving Savior Jesus is in need of a little anger management? At least that seems to be the initial reaction from many people. But was this really a case of Jesus just being angry, or is it possible that something much deeper is taking place here?

To be completely fair, when taking into account Jesus' reaction in the Temple; it's important that we understand that the first thing that happens *is not* that Jesus makes a whip of cords. The first thing that happens is that we're told the Passover was near and Jesus, along with tens of thousands of others, was making his way up to Jerusalem which included a stop at the Temple. And it's there at the Temple that Jesus goes off.

It might also be helpful to know why the outer court of the Temple was filled with all of those various merchants to begin with. Well, believe it or not, a system of commerce like that was necessary. It was a way of providing all those who were on their pilgrimage to celebrate the Passover, a means by which they could obtain what they needed in order to follow the religious rituals necessary for celebrating the holy festival.

So, when they encounter this angry Jesus, it's because the Temple had essentially been turned into *a mall*. It had all become about convenience. Anything you needed in order to follow the religious customs you could get there. The whole practice of worship and sacrifice had become more about providing all the amenities necessary to complete one's dutiful obligation with ease and comfort. Temple worship had become more about doing what had to be done quickly and easily more than heartfelt worship, thanksgiving, and praise.

But here's the thing...I don't think that the story in today's gospel is simply about Jesus getting angry. Jesus got angry. You and I – we get angry. It's perfectly natural to get angry. But if we focus here then I think we miss the point. There's far more to this storyline than just that, and personally I don't think it's really about the animals or the moneychangers being in the Temple either. Jesus had to have known that they were there. He grew up as a faithful Jew going to the temple and this was common practice as people prepared for one of the holiest feast days of the



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Jewish faith. Jesus didn't just show up one day and say, "Whoa, where'd all these animals and moneychangers come from and what are they doing here. Quite the opposite actually – that's just how the system worked. It was *business as usual* for them to be there. And I think Jesus went to the Temple that day for one purpose – to throw out and to overturn *business as usual*.

Throughout John's Gospel we are continually warned against the danger of misunderstanding – thinking that we understand Jesus, when the Jesus we think we understand is the Jesus of our own design, a Jesus with whom we are quite comfortable – the Jesus who doesn't respond in anger and frustration, the Jesus who doesn't yield a whip, the Jesus who doesn't turn tables over. When in fact what Jesus did and continues to do in these unexpected actions is to call to account all those *business-as-usual* behaviors that draw us away from God.

So, what if there's more to his words than we're hearing – and more to his will than we're doing?

I recently read an article in the *Living Lutheran* magazine highlighting how the ELCA is in the process of implementing a new and innovative future church design. What excites me about this new direction is that it's breaking away from the *business-as-usual* mindset and instead diving deeper into the core of the gospel message and grabbing hold of our doctrine of grace and justification in order to innovate, and with the heart of the gospel, connect our lives more faithfully to the will of God. And this is precisely what I think Jesus is getting at in today's gospel.

In today's gospel, John is letting us know that the focus has now shifted away from the temple to Jesus and to the prophecy of his death and resurrection. The point is, if the temple is truly the dwelling place of God, then the temple of God is no longer to be thought of as that physical structure in Jerusalem – or any other structure, for that matter – but in the person of Jesus Christ.

And what this means for us this morning is that the temple of God today is to be found in the hearts and minds of those who honor Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, wherever they may happen to be. This is what the apostle Paul told the Corinthians when he said, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you ...?" (1 Cor. 6:19)

Dear friends, we are the temple of the living God in the world today. And this is where Jesus' cleansing of the temple hits home for us, as we consider the many ways we've become lax in our spiritual disciplines and soft in our resistance to temptations and destructive behaviors and instead accommodate ourselves to the secular and selfish values of the world in which we live.

Sure, we're all prone to a little "backsliding" from time to time. And it's not as if we go off the deep end and abandon our Christian calling altogether. It's just that we let little things slip into our everyday lives and take precedent over our commitment to Christ and his kingdom, until our relationship with Jesus becomes secondary and insignificant.

It's a subtle process, this turning the temple into a marketplace. Like the houses we live in – a little dust and dirt build up on the baseboards and in the hard-to-reach nooks and crannies of each room, lint accumulates under the beds, mildew forms in the shower and around the tub, coffee stains appear on the carpet, cobwebs hang from the ceiling – it all happens so slowly that we hardly notice, until, one day, hopefully an alarm goes off, and we come to our senses, and we realize that it's time to do some spring cleaning and put our houses back in order.

And this is what I hope you will take home with you today – Lent is a time of introspection, of looking within and taking note of the various ways we've strayed from the righteousness of God. It's a time for cleansing the temple and making our lives – body, mind, and spirit – worthy places for the Spirit of God to dwell.



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The Good News for us today as we continue walking on our wilderness journey through Lent is that Jesus is with us and ultimately for us – even and especially as he’s flipping tables and calling out all the distractions and driving away those things that sidetrack us from God’s desires and God’s presence.

The season of Lent is a time for us to spend in prayer and reflection. A time to do a little spring cleaning. To ask ourselves if we’re putting His will first or our own. And while it is an intentional time for us to speak to God, it is also a time for us to listen.

So, maybe if we were to look at things a little differently then we might see that Jesus is doing a little spring cleaning because God is doing yet another new thing and doing it just for us. Maybe he’s trying to reveal himself to us in a whole new way – a way that brings us closer to him – one that uses our weaknesses, and our brokenness – a way in which he graciously and passionately journeys *with us* through the wilderness moments of our lives.

And it makes me wonder if we would only look a little deeper into the gospel message then maybe we would recognize God coming into our hearts and shining through your brokenness and mine. My prayer for us today is that this would carry us and guide us along this wilderness journey we’ve begun – a journey that will ultimately lead us closer to the heart of our loving God. So, as you engage in a little spring cleaning this Lenten season, may all that you say and do be to the great glory of God. Amen.