

**“Learning Where God Dwells”**

**John 2: 13-22**

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent- March 11, 2012

CCUMC

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**Before reading scripture**

This week is the second in a series of five on “Learning True Life: Lenten Lessons on Discipleship.” Last week we learned who God is; today we learn where God dwells. Today’s lectionary text moves us into the gospel of John and the story of Jesus cleansing the temple. This story of Jesus overturning the tables of the moneychangers appears in each of the four gospels. The synoptics—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—put this story at the end as a prelude to the Passion narratives. These three also have Jesus calling the temple a “den of robbers,” indicting the leaders for commercialism in God’s house. Yet the gospel of John places this story at the beginning in chapter 2. The first public act of Jesus’ ministry in John isn’t great healings or preaching, but overturning tables and pouring out the moneychangers’ coins. The Johannine Jesus also isn’t excoriating the temple-goers for marketing, as in the other gospels; in the gospel of John, Jesus is trying to make a larger point. Let us read the story and attend to what Jesus is proclaiming.

**Read John 2: 13-22**

Humans throughout history like to build big houses for God’s dwelling. In Europe, Christians built magnificent cathedrals that required the commitment of generations. Perhaps some of you have seen these houses of worship in Europe. What strikes you about them? (ask for responses) The high ceilings, the ornate design, the sheer size of the architecture . . . ?

We Christians of grand cathedrals perhaps inherited this tendency to want to house God from the Jews. In the Old Testament in the book of Exodus the wandering Israelites build a tabernacle and tent of meeting under Moses’ leadership. Solomon builds a grand

temple for God encrusted with God and precious gems. This building was commissioned by God, or Jahweh, in order that the Jews might live in covenant with God. God also commanded the sacrifice of animals in the temple for burnt offerings, offerings of well-being or for sin or for purification or for restitution; Leviticus chapters 2-5 offers copious descriptions of how these animals sacrifices were to be performed. For the Jews making offerings of animals constituted part of what it meant to be faithful and to follow the Torah.

Thus, the pilgrims for Passover in Jerusalem in our text today thought that they were being dedicated Jews, doing what God commanded them to do. For the early spring festival of Passover, close to three million people would journey from distant lands to celebrate their ancient story of the liberation from bondage in Egypt. Before the Passover meal, or Seder, with unleavened bread, they would participate in the sacrifice of animals. Since they came from lands with varying currencies, they would have to exchange their monies for the temple currency in order to buy their animals for sacrifice. The money-changers tables, the presence of all the animals (with their ensuing smells) comprised part of the necessary elements in order for Jewish worship to proceed.

Jesus' overturning of tables and pouring out of money came, then, as a most serious disruption of worship as usual on the busiest day of the Jewish year. He upsets tables, upsets the Jewish temple authorities, and upsets worship as it has always been known. In the gospel of John, Jesus isn't condemning marketing abuses—the system in this story functions as it should for the worship cult to proceed. Jesus is confronting and challenging the entire system itself. No wonder the authorities ask “What sign can you show us for doing this?” The leaders of the temple cult want a warrant from Jesus for such an egregious interruption of Passover proceedings. They want nothing less than a sign from God.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gail O' Day, “John” in *New Interpreters Bible Commentary* (Abingdon Press: Nashville), 543.

And so Jesus tells them, “I AM THE TEMPLE.” The temple authorities don’t get it. “Do what,” they say. “You think you can be a temple that has taken us generations to build? You think you can somehow replace centuries upon centuries of worship with nonsense talk of ‘rising again in three days?’ Whatever. Who do you think you are? By what authority do you think you are disrupting our worship?”

Jesus tells them, “I AM THE TEMPLE. I do this by God’s authority because my whole life is in God. My body is now the locus of God’s presence on earth. God doesn’t have to dwell in your worship and sacrifices anymore. The presence of God Almighty dwells in me. You don’t have to sacrifice animals anymore to participate in God. I am where God dwells, not the temple. Temple worship is now obsolete.”

Obviously, the temple authorities didn’t take too well to this; human beings have a propensity for struggling with the whole upending of their religion. Jesus understood that the worshippers on that Passover wouldn’t readily take to seeing him as the replacement of temple worship.<sup>2</sup> He understood that the Jews wouldn’t take to associating the dwelling place of God with him, rather than with sacrificial activity.<sup>3</sup> So he quotes Psalm 69: 9 “Zeal for your house will consume me” as a way of showing how their zeal for God’s house, for God’s worship, as they knew it, would consume him—would kill him.<sup>4</sup> Such knowledge is why, in the gospel of John, Jesus forecasts his crucifixion and resurrection in his very first act of public ministry. Jesus gets that his enormous challenge to institutionalism and a religious system embedded in its own rules and practices would lead to his own death.

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<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John, Vol. 1* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 356.

<sup>3</sup> Earnst Haenchen, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John, chapters 1-5* in the series *Hermenia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 184.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Hays, “Can the gospels teach us how to read the Old Testament?” *Pro Ecclesia*.

And yet, Christ's self-giving death and resurrection is why we have the church. Jesus' offering of himself as the very presence of God who then rises on the third day does indeed build up a new temple, a new community—the church. Commentator Joel Wohlgenut writes that “the self-giving death and resurrection of Jesus creates the possibility of God's residence within the community itself. The followers of Christ are the ‘temple of God.’ Today's community is where God dwells.”<sup>5</sup> The gospel of John itself affirms the community as the ongoing site of God's presence in what is called the Farewell Discourse in chapters 14-17—with language like “I am the vine, you are the branches” (John 15: 5). Jesus' entry into human history and overturning the tables of religious expectations occurred not just once for all but is continued in the life of the community through the resurrection.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, if Jesus is the temple and through his resurrection, the temple now dwells within us—God's presence now resides in us as a community. Lest we get too comfortable with being the site of God's presence, though, let us remember that this story today is about being open to the possibility of great change, of fresh revelation from God, of challenge to institutionalism, of not trying to box God into a building. This text today pushes us to ask, “what tables might Jesus overturn here?” This story of Jesus in the temple pushes us to question, “is God only here in this house of worship?” What do you think? (responses) This is not to suggest that our worship isn't important; worship shapes us and recreates us so that we can be Christ for the world. And so, the story pushes us to see that God can't be contained in our paradigms or in our buildings. Jesus' cleansing of the temple should overturn us so that we look for Jesus outside of our temple. What if Jesus dwells with the beggars at the intersection of Highways 82 and 133? (Now I'm starting to meddle!) What if Jesus dwells in the mobile home parks surrounding us?

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<sup>5</sup> Joel Wohlgenut, “Where Does God Dwell.” *Direction* vol 22, no 2 (Fall 1993), 92.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

I want to tell you a story of a church community that realized that they were not the site of God's dwelling place anymore. God had overturned the tables in their temple and pushed them outside to see where God was really dwelling. This community was Kempton Park Methodist Church in South Africa during apartheid, pastored by Trevor Hudson. Hudson realized that the impact of apartheid on this white, middle class suburban church had left them unaware of the poverty and homelessness around them. The church was largely in denial that God had left their building and had moved in across the street in the midst of the impoverished, segregated townships. In a moment of inspiration, God instructed Hudson to take his people to where people were suffering in their community. Over time, Hudson developed the idea of a Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope—a week-long experience where members of their community would visit the housing settlements of African peoples, as well as homeless shelters and drug rehab clinics. They would go as pilgrims, not tourists, as learners, not teachers, as receivers, not givers, as listeners, not talkers.<sup>7</sup> Miraculously, the congregation approved this idea, and after eight months of planning and preparation, the first pilgrimage of pain and hope began with a small group of fifteen pilgrims. The impact of this first pilgrimage was so profound that Hudson made a commitment to make an annual pilgrimage for his congregation, to shape the pilgrimage experience into a significant means for spiritual formation, and to seek to become a pilgrim of Christ in everyday life. (quote from p.77)

As a result, Hudson and his congregation spread their ideas on pilgrimage to other congregations (contained in his book *A Mile in My Shoes*). They came to understand the pilgrimage as containing three essential ingredients: encounter—reflection—transformation.

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<sup>7</sup> Trevor Hudson, *Compassionate Caring: A Daily Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope* (Eagle: Glasgow, 1999), 20. See also Trevor Hudson, *A Mile in My Shoes: Cultivating Compassion* (Nashville: UpperRoom Books, 2005), 20.

Encounter involved one experience of a context of suffering per pilgrimage day. Reflection involved journaling , mediation, and worship around the pilgrim's experiences.

Transformation, which cannot be planned, involves the gracious movement of the Holy Spirit in pilgrims lives' such that hearts are moved and lives changed. Pilgrimages of Pain and Hope offer a gospel-shaped spirituality that is both intensely personal and deeply aware of our suffering neighbor.<sup>8</sup>

These pilgrimages became popular throughout Methodist churches in South Africa. I became aware of them through Bishop Peter Storey, a bishop in the South African Methodist church who taught at Duke Divinity School for several years, and whom I was deeply fortunate to have as a teacher. Peter Storey, along with Trevor Hudson, organized a Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope to South Africa for Duke Divinity students and graduates—and I signed up for the very first one. I found my pilgrimage to be deeply transformative, and I remember in particular one encounter. While we were in the city of Johannesburg, we met with people who worked in a soup kitchen for street people. During the day we built relationships with these lovely, committed people and were trained in the dangers of Johannesburg's streets at night. Then that evening, the mobile soup kitchen rolled onto the toughest streets. We took bowls of soup and crusts of bread and hunted under bridges and around sewer pipes to find God's hungry humanity huddled there. I vividly remember handing warm soup to people—people forgotten by society, people battered and bruised and many in need of first aid care. Gentle, wise Trevor Hudson reminded me that here, in the streets, is where Jesus dwells. Here, in the exchange of soup and bread, is church. Here, in dank sewers and chain linked fences, is God's temple. Here is God's presence on earth.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 26.

I want to put out in your midst the idea, just the idea of a Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope from our congregation into the sites of suffering in our own community of Carbondale. If this is something you might feel called to, we would form a small group of pilgrims and prepare over several months for probably a weekend pilgrimage in our hometown. We would work with the missions committee to determine where sites of pain and hope might be. We would practice encounter-reflection- and transformation. We would see Jesus' temple dwelling in places we might never have even really seen—right in our own neighborhoods.

Maybe, we in CCUMC, can be open to what tables Jesus might be overturning in our own church. Maybe we can see that if Jesus is really the TEMPLE, and not our building, then Jesus might very well be somewhere outside of this physical plant waiting for us to meet him in the face of our suffering neighbor. May we have the courage to go and be where God dwells. In Christ's name. Amen