

The Rev. Josh Stephens  
St. John in the Wilderness  
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Lent 3, Year B

## **John 2:13-22**

The Passover of the Jews was near, and 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!” His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 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.

## Looking for a Sermon in the Cleansing of the Temple

There are a lot of options today if one were searching for a sermon. We have *the* 10 Commandments. That's right! You heard them here today, folks. Headline worthy when some debate over whether they should be posted outside of an Alabama courthouse comes up again. The rules for the rules.

And, of course, our Psalm is dropping some pearls left and right today: "The law of the Lord is perfect and revives the soul...." and "Who can tell how often he offends? Cleanse me from my secret faults" -- that's very Lenten (Psalm 19:7,12). Or most famously of all: "Let the words of the mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight... my strength and redeemer" (Psalm 19:14). St. Paul wants in on the action, too. He says, "Show me the best you got! Bring out your scholar, your scientist, your expert! "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's wisdom is stronger than human strength.... We proclaim Christ crucified!" Paul writes today.

By the time you get the Gospel reading, I can hardly believe my ears as I hear about the Passover Party getting started. The temple is packed with people looking for God, looking for guarantees, looking for forgiveness. There, in the middle of it all, are those selling animals for sacrifice and those profiting by making sure you have the proper currencies before you go in. *And then* Jesus does something most un-Christ-like, so it

seems. He makes a whip out of some rope he finds and uses the whip to drive out those profiting from the temple and his people's religion. He pours their money on the ground. He flips over the tables. He seems to liberate the sheep and cattle which take off thundering in a miniature stampede.

Man, I'm telling you that if you're looking for a sermon then we have some options this morning. Just throw a dart at the board! Spin the wheel! Roll the dice and see how they land because we have options today, folks! On this Third Sunday in Lent, we have a feast of biblical wisdom prepared before us and while the feast is appetizing and nutritious, there are some dishes before us that I'm scoping out as they get passed towards me, and I must admit that I'm just not sure that I can stomach it. The image of our Gospel reading with Jesus' sleeves rolled up like some kind of action-figure, wielding a whip, tossing tables around -- it's quite a hard passage to swallow, if you know what I mean. That's one passage that I definitely do not want to preach on today! How are we to make sense of Jesus this morning when we have one who is so dedicated to proclaiming the peaceable Kingdom of God seeming to do violence in anger?

Some of our modern brothers and sisters have read this passage to be an endorsement of a radical moral imperative on the one hand and, on the other hand, there are those Christians who use this passage as moral

justification for anything they please. Sermons don't need wishy-washy ethics like that! People already can easily find justification for the things they've already done, rather than first determining ethics to live by.

The one group claims that the "Cleansing of the Temple," as this story is classically called, demonstrates that some property, like the tables that Jesus overturned, is illegitimate because it preserves systems of oppression and violence. These folks, in more extreme examples, have broken into military facilities in protest to nuclear arms and symbolically and literally taken hammers to warheads to "beat their swords into ploughshares," as the prophet Isaiah wrote.

On the other end of the spectrum, perhaps closer to home, countless Christians have found this passage to serve as justification for doing whatever they want when they get upset about this issue or that issue. "Sometimes you have to overturn the tables and say enough is enough," I've heard good Christian people say. Marriage problems? Flip over the tables! School board making you mad? Go tell them what you really think! Congress certifying an election you disagree with? Get your whips out and create a legislative stampede.

Again, I'm not sure this Gospel is really sermon material -- not if you're expecting the preacher to make sense of all this!

A lot of sermons on this passage like to talk about righteous anger versus unrighteous anger. That is typically how you get a sermon out of this thing. You've likely heard that one before. Our Christian tradition affirms that Jesus was without sin, something that I believe also, so it's troubling if our guy just gets mad, goes into the temple, and starts throwing stuff around. That *would be* what we call sin. But if Jesus sees people making his father house "a den of robbers" and has righteous anger over it, then he can choose -- instead of just reacting with a lost temper -- to make a righteous spectacle of it and to set things right. He can choose to make a little mess in order to clean up a larger mess.

That's where most sermons land: righteous anger is ok if you can keep your ego out of it. That will preach just fine, *but* -- and I hate to qualify this since we are so close to finding a sermon -- it's really, really hard to be angry without your ego involved. Righteous anger is hard to come by, broken as we are.

Man, I have been looking all week for that sermon in these passages but here we are. Like you, I'm also wondering why I didn't just preach on the Ten Commandments. They're looking a lot more straightforward at this point. Ten rules: do this and don't do that. But here we are at the temple after this wild new rabbi with a cult following made a huge scene. It sounds like you guys need a specialist for this sort of problem.

I'm more of a GP so maybe I can give you a referral to someone who can help figure this thing out.

I always thought sermons were meant to *explain* the Scriptures, but you can see how that is going. *If I could recommend one thing this morning*, it would be to just let the story stand as something that happened. Even the most skeptical historical scholars do say that this cleansing of the temple thing actually happened. It's in all four Gospels which is not super common. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and the version with the whip from John -- they all have this story. We should have just read the Gospel passage, listened closely and deeply, and then sat in silence for five minutes. That would have made a better homily.

I will say this: it's rather fascinating that Jesus overturned the tables, ran off the money changers, let the animals loose and -- something like thirty years later -- the temple is destroyed entirely and an entire system of religious observance centuries or millennia in the making is gone. It's like the cleansing of the temple is a foreshadow of what is to come as followers of this Jesus begin to reinterpret the law and figure out what in the world the Holy Spirit is up to now both in the world and in their hearts.

Maybe that's the question we should be asking for this sermon: What is the Holy Spirit up to now in the world and in our hearts? I think that's the question we ask for every sermon, isn't it? It can be hard to discern

what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world but I trust she's at work, always.

I can say with humbled clarity that Jesus has turned over a lot of tables in my heart throughout the years.<sup>1</sup> There were things I have bought and sold that were of no profit to my soul. I could tell you he “rearranges the furniture of our hearts,” -- doesn't that sound so nice -- but it's often messier than that, especially when we resist. Sometimes it's not so fun, but you know what? I want more of it. I pray he does more of it in me, in our temples, in our world. That's my prayer after wrestling with this reading for many years plus this week.

I'm not sure that's really a sermon. Next time one of you can preach.

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<sup>1</sup> This was inspired by Origen of Alexandria's *Commentary on John* (2nd century), see section 16. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/101510.htm>