

John 2:13-22 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

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.

I'm in a lot of nerdy youth pastor Facebook groups, and there's a meme that goes around every year in Lent when this reading comes up. And it depicts Jesus in the temple and it says "If anyone ever asks you 'What Would Jesus Do?' remind them that flipping over tables and chasing them with a whip is within the realm of possibility." I don't think that's what people are expecting when they ask "What Would Jesus Do?" right? I mean this passage of scripture is weird. It's even weirder in the book of Mark where this story starts with Jesus cursing a fig tree. This story is just plain weird. So much so that if you had never read any scripture before and you started here, you'd probably think "this Jesus dude is angry and a little violent. What is his deal?" But like most passages of scripture we have to zoom out a little bit to get the context of this situation.

This passage is read during the season of Lent because it's a story that happens as the Jewish people are preparing for the Passover celebration, in a similar way to our preparation in Lent for the celebration of Easter. Easter is the holiest day of the Christian year, because we celebrate our Salvation through

Jesus' resurrection. Passover was and is the holiest day of the Jewish year because the people celebrate their ancestors' salvation by God from the plague of the Death of the first-born and their subsequent freedom from slavery in Egypt. There are all kinds of similarities in these celebrations because one springs from the other. But one thing that's really different is the pilgrimage.

Of the major world religions, Christianity doesn't really do pilgrimages. Now plenty of people go to the Holy Land and they might even use that word "pilgrimage," and Orthodox and Catholic Christians might visit Rome or various sites associated with Saints and miracles. But in Western, Protestant Christianity, we don't have that sense of requirement that goes along with it the way those First Century Jewish people did. Every follower of Judaism was supposed to go to the Temple in Jerusalem and offer a sacrifice for Passover. Jerusalem would be packed because of this. They *had* to go to Jerusalem for this feast in a way that we as Western Protestant Christians don't *have* to do anything. We just don't do pilgrimages like that in our religion.

But we do *do pilgrimages* in our culture. And we definitely do in this state. Anybody ever been in Chapel Hill or in Durham the weekend of the Duke-UNC game? It's nuts, right? You've got to make your hotel reservations way in advance; and forget about restaurant reservations. There are people everywhere, they're decked out in the appropriate shade of blue, there are people selling stuff on the street, there are people scalping tickets, there's people with carts of food. Okay, that's Jerusalem during the lead-up to Passover.

The population would go up from 50,000 to 180,000 because of people coming in, obeying the Torah and offering their sacrifices. And that's what Jesus is there to do. He and his disciples are being good Jewish boys and they are there to

offer their sacrifice. Which is supposed to be an unblemished ox or sheep, or if you were too poor to afford one of those, which most people were, a dove. And all those people coming from afar weren't bringing sheep and oxen with them because they weren't going to be unblemished by the time they got to Jerusalem. And they're showing up with the currency of wherever they came from.

So here is our scene: the vendors are set up in the middle of this crazy situation with their animals and with their "acceptable" coins for the Temple tax. And *they'd* probably say they were performing a service, but Jesus comes into this moment sees what they are really doing, which is ripping people off and making a profit, and using God's name to do so. And not just that, but they are set up in the Temple, in the dwelling place of God. So we can start to see how Jesus, God the Son himself, would get angry at this. And he acts on this righteous anger, and he overturns the moneychangers' tables and he drives the animals (and maybe their handlers) out of the Temple.

Now here's what I want to hone in on. This idea of what's being "driven out" of the temple. The Greek word used there for "drive out" is *exebalen*, and that word is used several other times throughout the Gospels, usually when Jesus *drives out* demons from someone's body, and when he heals the man of leprosy and *sends him away* to the temple for ritual cleansing. When Jesus comes upon these people, there is something wrong deep within them, something that's causing problems all the way out of their bodies, to their skin or to their mental health or out into their relationships. And Jesus comes in contact with them and cures that inner sickness until everything all the way out is healed. He reaches in with surgical precision and he cuts out the issue, the problem, the sin, and he fills that space with love and grace and with himself.

The temple has been defiled, and Jesus is cleansing it. He's reaching in and driving this sickness out so that the temple can be used for its intended purpose—to honor His Father.

And when he is questioned about it, he immediately uses this metaphor about the Temple being destroyed and rebuilt. And the Jewish leaders don't get it. Because Jesus is talking about the Temple of his own body. He's pointing forward to his own death and resurrection, but he's also pointing forward to us. The Apostle Paul would write decades later in his first letter to the Corinthians

¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?

Lent for us is a time of sacrifice. Not sacrifice like the First Century Jews would do, with animals on the altar and knives and blood and the whole nine yards. But many people, maybe many of you in this room, will and have chosen to give something up for these forty days, and to focus in on God in place of that sacrifice. It's a time to let Jesus reach in to these fleshy temples of ours and drive out the mess.

I was in Morocco last summer. My best friend Mike, a guy from Weeksville, North Carolina, got married to a girl from Fez, Morocco. So Mike's parents, and his sisters, and I all got on planes and we flew to northern Africa for his wedding. Now, I've been out of the country plenty of times, in fact I lived in Ecuador for a while, so international travel didn't seem like a terribly big deal to me. I knew Mike was going to take care of me when I got there, and I had a plan. I was travelling with Mike's sisters Sarah and Laura, and between the three of us we worked out the very detailed schedule of how we would get to Spain, and then

Morocco, and then back to Spain and then back to the US, and what we'd do in each of those places. We're all twenty- and thirty-something busy North Americans and we know how to make a plan. And we stuck to it for a few days. We stuck to our plans for buses and planes and trips to the 600-year-old Old City, and to the market in Fez, and to waterfalls in Sefrou and then all the wedding preparations. And then two nights before the wedding I started to feel sick.

We'd been travelling, we were short on sleep, we were probably all a lot less hydrated than we should have been, and we'd been eating very different food than we were used to. So for about 12 hours I thought this pain in my abdomen was just due to the adjustments in my diet. Until it started getting worse. And it kept getting worse. Until it had a name. Because we realized that I had appendicitis. And so there in the middle of my vacation, in the middle of my plans and my busy-ness, I had to go to the hospital.

A student at our youth Beach Retreat last weekend asked us "How do you get closer to God?" Well, I'll tell you one way. Have surgery in a foreign country where you don't speak the language. That'll bring you close to God *real* quick. I prayed for the pain in my side to stop, I prayed for my appendix not to decide to rupture overnight before they could take it out in the morning. I prayed that I wouldn't have an adverse reaction to the anesthesia. I prayed for the people around me because they were way more freaked out than I was, and I prayed for mom back here in the US because she has to find this out in international text messages from Sarah and I knew she was freaking out. And of all the stupid things to worry about, I prayed that my plans wouldn't get messed up. That I could still get to the wedding, and that I could get on my plane back to Barcelona.

The next morning the surgeon reached in and he took out my unhealthy appendix, and he left behind a huge incision that's now a pretty huge scar. They do this kind of surgery the old-fashioned way in Morocco, and after that cut through all that muscle in the middle of me, I couldn't move. I missed the wedding ceremony that I'd flown across the ocean for. I missed my plane back to Barcelona. I stayed in the hospital in Fez for five days total, and just caught up to the girls in Madrid to fly back to the US. And even when I got back to the US, it was two full weeks before I was back to any kind of normal schedule. That is, to my North American busy-ness. And you know what else will bring you close to God? Down time. Rest.

My friend and colleague Lydia is constantly telling me I need more intentional Sabbath time. Well, those two weeks I got it. God reached into all those plans I had, and he ripped out that sin of busy-ness and he left behind a peace and a focus on him. My appendix had to be driven out for my body to be healthy, but my schedule had to be driven out for my spirit to honor God.

I hope that Lent is not nearly as dramatic for you as having animals driven out of this temple, or a sickness driven out of this one. But as we spend forty days intentionally turning from our sin and turning to God, it is my prayer that we all would name those things that get in our way to God, whether its as simple as our busy-ness or something else. That we would allow Christ to reach in and drive the mess from our temples, so we can use them to honor our Father.