

Sermon: John 2:13-22
When We Miss The Mark

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John 2:13-22 (NRSV)

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.

I love to travel and explore. When I moved to Oregon, I made a list of 101 Things To Do here. It includes things like going to Multnomah Falls, visiting Powell's bookstore, attending a Linfield Football Game, and of course visiting the Tillamook Cheese Factory. In the midst of all my traveling, I have picked up some tips and tricks to exploring tourist sites or attending popular events.

1. Do your research. What should you expect? What are must do things while you are there? What should you avoid?
2. Arrive early. There is nothing worse than rushing through something or finding that you missed some important aspect.
3. *I find this to be the most important tip* Visit at off peak hours if possible. You might miss the atmosphere, but you can take your time, enjoy it more, and get the undivided attention of people who work there. For example, going to the Tillamook Cheese Factory on a Wednesday in February is very different than a Saturday afternoon in July. Or visiting the Hood River Fruit Loop in the spring is much less overwhelming than the summer months.

Not heeding any of my recommendations, Jesus finds himself at the temple right before Passover, his disciples in tow. This is a high holy day and the temple is the place to be. This is one of the busiest times for the temple. Jesus is seeking out a place to be reflective and reverent. He is seeking out a holy, sacred space. He is seeking out peace.

They are still a far way off as they make their way to the temple. As it comes into view in the distance, Jesus can see the construction. The temple is under construction as Herod the Great has begun a massive restoration and expansion. What a sight it must have been. As Jesus and his group get closer and closer to the temple, there are more people around them. With Passover so close they are not the only ones making this holy pilgrimage. Families come seeking to make a sacrificial offering to God; thanking God for seeing them through oppressive times.

Jesus continues walking up and finally gets onto the grounds of the temple. He shimmies past people, sidesteps vendors, annoyed by the hustle and bustle and commercialism that Passover has become. Jesus comes to the Court of the Gentiles and finds it resembles an open-air market. Cattle are bellowing, sheep bleating, turtledoves cooing, people yelling, coins clanging. While the actions reflect the transactions that must take place—as people can't be expected to keep a sacrificial animal unblemished while traveling from far away—Jesus is annoyed and angered. This is a holy place! A holy place!¹

Jesus continues on inside the temple hoping to escape the hubbub, seeking the quiet refuge and solitude reserved for the holy sanctum of prayer. And as he enters inside, the place reflects less the holiness expected and more mirrors the activity outside. Fed up with what he has stumbled across—not a reverent temple, but a transactional space of business—he begins to flip over tables.

I want to pause here and switch our focus from Jesus to his disciples. This radical rabbi they followed was a bit unorthodox and I imagine this ragtag group of nobodies had to have a bit of bravado in order to so daringly follow Jesus. As Jesus tried as quickly as possible to maneuver his way around the crowds, I imagine Timothy and Bartholomew and Philip and Peter walking amongst the crowds with a bit of swagger, enjoying being seen traveling in with Jesus. So, imagine their surprise when Jesus starts flipping over tables, emptying coins from the money changers, and angrily fashions a whip of chords to drive out the animals, I can only imagine the gusto that left the disciples as they sought to blend in with the crowd.

The past couple of weeks our Adult Education class has been looking at the book of Amos. One of the ideas we wrestled with is, how can we proclaim that God is Love and also come to terms with the wrath of God's Judgement. This same tension of love and rage can also be seen here as Jesus wreaks havoc on the Passover crowd.

Knowing the customs of the time, we know that people were expected to make sacrificial offerings to God. And those offerings were to be unblemished animals. So it would make sense to have animals at the temple to purchase. And coin changers were necessary as governmental money needed to be exchanged for coins to be used at the temple. And it makes sense that because it was Passover there would be large crowds and substantial rules put in place to ease the process along. But stepping back it all had become too much. The reasoning and intent behind what was happening wasn't bad, it was the process and what it had become that missed the mark.

So much of Jesus' ministry was about the nuances of faith. Jesus wasn't just having a bad day and was tired of the crowds. Jesus looked around and didn't like what religion had become. The intent was right, but the execution was being exploited. It was acceptable and encouraged to celebrate Passover and make an offering, but it had become a task to complete and not a holy experience to participate in.

This feels very relatable to me. How often do my best intentions become tasks on a checklist. Special traditions with family become another "must" in our holiday schedules. Or signing on social media to connect with friends, turns into a war of words over the hot political topic. How often as a church do we focus on the way things have always been done verses the heart of why things are done. Religion is messy. Life is messy. Relationships are messy. And the best intentions can easily go awry.

In this season of Lent, as we journey towards the cross, we are reminded that Jesus didn't die for just the murderers and rapist and kidnappers and *those* people. Jesus died upon the cross for all of us who

wake up each day trying to make the next right decision. Jesus went to the cross for all of us who come up short, missing the mark. Jesus journeyed to the cross for all of us who sin despite our best efforts. Jesus dies for all of us who deserved to have our tables overturned. This is the beauty of Lent, we sit in darkness knowing that grace in flesh is heading to the cross with us in mind. We look to the cross with hope and longing; with the assurance of what is to come.

ⁱ *Some descriptions taken from Feasting on the Word commentator Paul C. Shupe*