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

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Our text, And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, 'Take these things away; do not make my Father's house of trade.' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'"*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Historically, there's been a great debate over John's account of Jesus' cleansing the temple. We'll get to that in a minute, but – sadly – on account of current events, it is necessary for us to defend Jesus' cleansing of the temple and the righteousness of his act. Two months ago to the day, in response to the riots on Capitol Hill, our nation's Speaker of the House and Illinois' senior senator unfortunately decided to ratchet up the rhetoric and referred to that occasion as an attack against "the temple of Washington DC." That rhetoric immediately gave opinion writers reason to compare the righteousness of the 'cleansing of DC's temple' to the righteousness of Jesus' cleansing of the temple of Jerusalem. But it wasn't even an original argument. Already last summer, various social media claims were comparing the righteousness of the Black Lives Matter riots

with the scene of Jesus overturning moneychanger tables in the temple.<sup>1</sup>

You see how the devil works: now, if Christians confess the righteousness of Jesus' act, will we be seen as social justice warriors or will we be accused of supporting 'insurrection', neither of which is the Gospel? Will the Bible be accused of *teaching* insurrection so that it must be cancelled? It might sound far-fetched, but those who oppose the Scriptures are always looking for reason to censor or 'cancel' the Scriptures. Recall that social activists used the book of Philemon to say the Bible supports slavery; they used Paul's words to the Romans to say the Bible supports homophobia; and they highlighted the all-male apostleship and clergy to say the Bible supports sexism and to denounce patriarchal households. And, perhaps because the Church merely rolled its eyes and didn't bother to respond, the lack of push-back gave the charges credence, so that today liberal churches are quick to denounce and apologize for and re-interpret such a "socially-backwards and out-of-touch" thing as the Word of God.

So, let's go on the record and make it clear that Jesus' temple cleansing is nothing like the sinful actions of angry citizens of the United States – whether at the Capitol or in cities across America. *He* was upholding the First Commandment; *they* were breaking the

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<sup>1</sup> [Arizona Pastor Jeff Durbin Offers Biblical Response to Violent Looting, Rioting | CBN News](#)

Fourth Commandment. *His* concern was holy; *their* concern was civil. *His* zeal was regarding the Lord's house; theirs was regarding 'the people's house.' And, oh yeah, that one small detail: He is God; they're not. Yeah, that's sort of an important point.

So, far from legitimizing insurrection (which, ironically, the prisoner the people chose over Jesus – Barabbas – had been arrested for *insurrection!*), far from any of what Jesus did being comparable to or somehow prophetic license for an act of civil unrest to declare 'political justification' in a pagan society 2000 years later, we ought recognize the temple cleansing to be an act of divine unrest and judgment in the days forecasting the cross and the Lamb of God's sacrifice for the spiritual justification of the whole world.

But that recognition brings up another dispute, that original historical dispute, about interpreting this temple cleansing. This 'great debate' I mentioned in the sermon's first sentence is the dispute whether John's account of temple cleansing is the same event as what Matthew, Mark, and Luke record as happening – not at the *beginning* of Jesus' ministry (John 2), but at the *end*... the Monday of Holy Week. Because of some slightly different details in the record, the famous Early Church theologian Chrysostom believed it was two completely different occurrences; but most theologians – including Luther – find it hard to believe Jesus would have been given opportunity to do this *twice*. In fact, the charge of him

threatening the temple even came up at his trial before the Sanhedrin.

So, what are we make of all of this? To get at the heart of this we ought set aside the details of *how* Jesus cleansed the temple (that's so unimportant that Matthew, Mark, and Luke barely even mention any detail); rather, let's focus on *why* Jesus cleansed the temple. Begin with his words, for they explain the conduct:

In our text, Jesus says, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade." The other gospels record Jesus as being angry that they had turned the temple into "a den of robbers." But such anger is not merely about dishonesty with financial figures... instead, his righteous indignation is tied right back to the prophetic word, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

Well, where is that word from? It's from the 69<sup>th</sup> psalm (those reading our weekly Calvary at Daily Prayer exercises might recall this from a few weeks ago). In that 69<sup>th</sup> psalm, the one who loves God (a picture of Christ Jesus) bears the reproach of God before the nations as he carries the hope of those who trust in God. The psalm says,

"Let not those who hope in you be put to shame through me, O LORD God of hosts; let not those who seek you be brought to dishonor through me, O God of Israel. For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered my face. I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons. *For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me.*"

In short, just as the psalm says it, Jesus knows he is bearing the reproach of a world that hates the will of God (just look at its contempt for the Ten Commandments), a world that – even in Jesus’ own day – would disregard the true and holy purpose of the Temple (God’s dwelling place with man!). And Jesus knows that his mission of salvation for the whole world, but especially those who believe in him, will be met with that wicked world’s bloodthirsty reproach. But, so be it, he comes not as victim, but as Judge.

There, perhaps is the single biggest difference between Jesus’ cleansing of the temple and any absurd civil comparison. Jesus is not trying to get noticed as one who has complaint; He comes as divine Judge, and He carries in His body the holiness of God’s Temple, the holiness of His Law – for God’s Law is not a random set of arbitrary divine rules, but the emanation of His own essence... so that to despise His Law, His Temple is to despise God Himself. Thus, the First Commandment regards His essence, the rest of the commandments emanate and flow from it.

Thus, Jesus comes to the Temple as zealous Defender of His Holiness and thus zealous Defender of all who honor his Holiness and hope in His promises, just as the Scriptures say that he would. Consider the prophet Malachi, who says, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom *you* seek will **suddenly** come to his temple.”

Who is that messenger to prepare the way before him?

That's John the Baptist, who preaches repentance that the people might escape the wrath and judgment of God when he comes. But, then, right on the heels of John (as the prophecy of Malachi says) "the Lord whom you seek will **suddenly** come to his temple."

Now, think about this for a minute: What is the entire *first* chapter of the apostle John's gospel about? It's about John the forerunner (the Elijah who is to come) preparing the way, about his disciples Simon and Andrew, Philip and Nathanael being pointed to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Then, what happens in the *second* chapter of John's gospel: shades of "the Lord whom you seek will **suddenly** come to his temple." This is why John places the temple cleansing at the beginning of his gospel – remember, his gospel was not meant to be chronological, but doctrinal... he placed the temple cleansing at the beginning of his gospel that you, dear Christian, might be reminded of how **sudden** is the judgment of God Most High.

Sudden not just upon the world, but upon anything that has been made his temple, so that with a righteous zeal he now defends such as his holy temple. Just as he turned cold stones into the building of a great Old Testament temple, has he not turned your cold-stone heart into the temple of the Holy Spirit? And thus, will he not judge it, cleanse it, overturn all of its sinful ways out of great zeal for that heart, that which is supposed to be a holy habitation of the

Holy Spirit: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit,” St Paul asks? “You are not your own; you were bought with a price.” A very handsome price at that – the blood of God himself.

Thus, just as Malachi’s prophecy forewarns, just as John the Baptist forewarned, just as the gospel writer’s account forewarns by his placement of this temple cleansing at the beginning of his account, the Lord comes *suddenly* to render judgment.

In fact, isn’t that what is said not just in the Old Testament that points forward to the coming Messiah, but also in the Epistles that serve as the divine commentary on the coming of the Messiah? Don’t they say, “For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God”? (1 Peter 4:17). And that house cannot be interpreted as any structure of stone, but rather Peter’s epistle continues, “and if it begins with us, what shall the end be for those who do not obey the gospel?”

Now, what does Peter mean? That our salvation rests with our obedience to the gospel? Only if you properly render that word “obedience” to mean “the life lived in hope,” and then recall the words of the psalm we considered earlier, “Let not those who hope in you be put to shame through me... let not those who seek you be brought to dishonor through me.”

Jesus knows he bears the weight of the whole world, but especially those of the household of faith... those of the household of faith *over and against* those who claim the keys to the Temple, those

religious leaders who spend all of John's gospel debating Jesus and claiming Abraham as their father and claiming true ownership of the Temple of God. Against these stubborn subjects of judgment, Jesus defends not only his deity, but - by defending himself in quite a peculiar way: going to the cross to complete his salvific mission – He also defends and rescues and saves especially those who hope in him: “God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, **that whoever believes in Him will not perish**, but have everlasting life.” Yes, Jesus knows your hope rests with him. And in great zeal for God's true and eternal dwelling place with man – that true and eternal covenant with man, where he dwells with you right at his altar no loner in an Old Testament temple, but now at the table of His Son's very body and blood – in zeal for that great covenant promise, Jesus is willing to bear the reproach of those who reproach God and that very covenant... and Jesus is willing to go that cross and forever establish that covenant by his death, and seal it and pour it out in his blood, that you might be partakers who are not put to shame.

And, thus, he ends the text by pointing to himself in a way those who reproach his covenant would never understand, but those who hope in him would remember when he was raised from the dead: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

There's your hope. There's the covenantal promise of which you need not be ashamed as he bears it all the way to the cross as

the Lamb of God. In fact, isn't that exactly why John includes the details of driving out the sheep and oxen? Nothing else can satisfy the sacrificial altar. Nothing else – no sheep or oxen – can be so sufficient an offering that the Temple would become obsolete. Nothing else can shed blood of righteousness for an eternal justification before God. Nothing can accomplish, can finish, what the Lamb of God has been sent to accomplish, to be able to cry, "It is finished." Only in Jesus, but *truly* in Jesus, is it all finished, all accomplished, all brought to **swift and sudden** conclusion on a most peculiar altar of sacrifice.

Be not ashamed before the world of the One who bears the reproach of the nations. Be not embarrassed before the world by the One who acts with holy zeal toward the only temple that truly matters... the temple no longer of the Old Covenant, but now the temple of His body having been laid down for the purchase price of the temple of your body, that – by the gift of the Holy Spirit in your baptism – you might share in the righteousness of his saving death and, in due time, share in the raising up of that temple... in *His* resurrection made *yours*.

In the Name of the Father  
 And of the Son  
 And of the Holy Spirit.  
 + AMEN +

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