

“The Clue in the Temple”

Introduction: Judging by this sermon title you might think we’re going to be discussing a Nancy Drew mystery together this morning! Though I have a soft spot in my heart for that “titan-haired, attractive young sleuth” (as she’s often described), having spent many an hour reading her stories aloud to my daughters, that’s not what we’re about today. But we are going to continue looking for and examining clues, clues that John has left us in his gospel, clues that are meant to lead to, and help us better understand, the treasure that is Jesus.

Last week’s clue came in the form of Jesus, a guest at a wedding where the supply of wine had run dry, turning 150 gallons of water into wine. We noted how that clue revealed the compassionate heart of Jesus, hinted at the purification that Jesus had come to provide, and anticipated the abundant and intoxicating joy that a relationship with him brings.

This morning, in the second half of his second chapter, John has laid out a kind of companion clue for his readers in the cleansing by Jesus of the Temple in Jerusalem. It’s a companion in that we move from a small town, Cana, to a large city, Jerusalem. We move from the north, Galilee, to the south, Judea. We move from someone’s home to a place of worship. We move from a very private and personal event that is a wedding, to the major, public festival of Passover. And we move from Jesus working with 6 stone jars used for purification, to one very large stone structure used for worship and sacrifice. It’s as if John is laying out a big picture for us before he moves on, setting the tone for all that follows – that Jesus has come to all and for all.

So, what in particular might we learn from this clue in the Temple? Jesus, we will see, has come not only to cleanse the Temple, but to judge and replace it with himself. He becomes the place, the “house,” where we experience the hospitality of God, a hospitality, he reminds us, we are to extend to others.

I. The Need for Cleansing

A. Jesus, as John lays it out for us, has gone up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Passover was one of four major feasts of the Jewish faith. It marked the deliverance by God of his people from slavery in Egypt. It also marked the birth of their mission, their birth as a people whose vocation was to be a “kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6), revealing God’s love and light to the nations—the Gentiles—around them. When he arrived in Jerusalem Jesus went to the Temple. The Temple was not only the center of where this celebration would take place, it was also the heart of Jewish faith and life, the symbol around which all else circulated. Even more importantly, the Temple was the place where one came to enter into and experience the presence and hospitality of God.

B. To get a sense of the importance of this we need to be reminded that the goal of creation is for men and women to dwell in the presence of God. This goal is summed up by John in the last two chapters of the Bible as he describes heaven, not as a place to which we try and escape, but as the new Jerusalem coming down to join with earth. Then John says this: “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:1-4). What a beautiful life being fully in that presence describes!

C. Up until the time of Jesus, experiencing God's presence was often referred to as being in God's "house," in which a hospitality was offered that led to life and joy. The Psalms, in particular, are rich with this image:

- As Psalm 23 concludes, with a picture of a full table and an overflowing cup: "Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

- Or, as Psalm 26:8 puts it: "LORD, I love the house where you live, the place where your glory dwells."

- Or, as Psalm 36:7-8 declares: "How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house."

D. This house, this dwelling place, was also symbolized by the Temple:

- As we heard described in Psalm 27:4: "One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple."

- Or, as Psalm 84 begins: "How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD."

Now, what Jesus discovered as he came into the courts of the Temple was that the hospitality that God wanted the nations to experience in his house, through his people, was not being offered. The temple courts were the outer courts, the place where the Gentiles were welcomed to gather so that they could observe and pray and begin to experience what life with the living God was all about. These outer courts were kind of like the "standing room only" sections of our modern sports stadiums where, even if you didn't have a ticket for seat, you could still come and get a look and experience the game.

E. The problem was that these outer courts, as Jesus found them, were filled with money changers and farmers selling animals for sacrifice. Pilgrims coming to Jerusalem needed to change their shekels into a special temple currency in order to pay the temple tax, and they also needed to purchase an appropriate animal to offer as their sacrifice as it was difficult to bring one along on their journey. Now, there was actually nothing wrong with either of these activities. The problem Jesus had, which led him to overturn the tables and drive the sellers out, was not with the *what* but with the *where*. While this business had begun outside of the Temple, actually on the other side of the valley, it had slowly but surely moved closer and closer to the Temple until now all of the buying and selling and exchanging was taking place in its outer courts. Such business brought with it so much activity and so much noise that it was next to impossible for a Gentile to worship. Instead of a house of prayer for all nations (Isa. 56:6-7; Mark 11:17) the temple courts had become a shopping mall. Even worse, instead of a place of invitation for all nations, it became a way of exclusion, a way for Jewish leadership to discriminate against and to keep Gentiles out of the house where God had invited them to come.

F. So Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers and drove the sellers of the sacrifices out. As one of you observed the other day, Jesus was in no mood for compromise! He didn't start by saying, "Let's talk about this and see if we can't find some middle ground." Why such a forceful response? His act declared that something had become incredibly rotten in the Temple; it needed to be scattered and overturned.

I wonder, as I come to this text, what Jesus would find in our churches that he might need to scatter and overturn? I think about what might be in danger of becoming excluding and discriminating, of standing in the way of having others experience the hospitality of God, of keeping people away without our even knowing it. In this regard, I wonder about this sense we can have of an outsiders need to believe, then to behave, and then to belong. Could we have the order wrong? Could we be so worried about what people believe and how they behave that we end up driving them away before they've even had a chance to meet Jesus and belong? Could it be that we need to begin on the other end, with belonging, with inviting people to come and be among us and experience Jesus with us as they do the things we do? Upon experiencing that, might they then be led to think about how their behavior might need to change, in response to what they've seen in us? And then might they recognize that their beliefs then need to change in the way and will of the God whom they've experienced? Can you see the difference?

Illustration: I was thinking about this a few days ago when an email popped into my box. Its writer was describing a drive he had taken on I70 through rural Indiana. On this drive, he came across two billboards. The first said, "Genuine Christians obey Jesus' teachings." About four miles down the road he saw another. It said, "Jesus has hope for you." Both, he thought to himself, are true. But to a seeker (to whom presumably these billboards were directed), to someone lurking around the "outer courts" of the Christian life, looking to get a glimpse, these billboards reveal quite different messages. The first begins by drawing a line, between those who behave rightly and those who do not. It's an "us/them" message right from the start, with the seeking person finds themselves on the outside. By contrast, the second begins by opening the door, desiring to communicate that there is something good that is inside and available for you.

Genuine hospitality doesn't begin with demanding someone clean themselves up before we invite them in and care for them; it begins with inviting them in and caring for them and having the cleaning up come out of and from the hospitality they've experienced. Can we become so concerned with belief and behavior that we lose the ability to love and hope? If so, Jesus just might have some scattering and overturning to do.

II. The New Temple

A. Well, as you might imagine, the religious authorities are not so keen on what Jesus did. Rightly, they wonder about his authority and demand a sign to prove that authority. He responds, rather mysteriously, by talking about destroying the temple and raising it again in three days. No one, not the temple authorities, nor the disciples, understood this, at the time. It sounded crazy. The current structure, begun under Herod in 20 B.C. after having been destroyed centuries earlier by the Babylonians, had taken 46 years to rebuild. Some of its stones weighed up to seventy tons, and 18,000 full-time workers had been employed!

B. But after the resurrection, the penny dropped, at least for the disciples. They began to realize that the temple Jesus had spoken of was his body. He had come not just to cleanse, but to replace the Temple. Looking, as we can, from our post-resurrection, post-Pentecost perspective, what can we see?

- As we explore this clue, we can see that God no longer meets us in the Temple, but in Jesus. Jesus became flesh, as John puts it in his introduction, and "tabernacled" among us (1:14). Jesus was now the "house" in which the glory of God dwells and in which we find life and joy.

- We can see that Jesus has actually replaced the Temple, not only as a meeting place, but also as a place of sacrifice. Jesus is now the sacrifice; animal sacrifices, offered in the Temple, were only temporary and no longer necessary, following the sacrifice Jesus would make. In fact, Jesus bypassed the entire temple system, pronouncing forgiveness of sins on hillsides, in homes, and on the streets, right then and there, without an animal sacrifice. The Temple had become obsolete.

- We can see, if few look closely, that the church is still to be focused on the outer courts, that the hospitality we experience from Jesus is to be extended to those who are seeking and wondering and thinking about drawing near. The church remains a wonderful place for worship and for fellowship, but we are also called by Jesus to go outside our walls and extend the hospitality we've received. As a kingdom of priests, we are to be, as NT Wright puts it, "little temples," people both *in whom* God dwells, and also *through whom* others can meet the living God. May we not prevent them from coming to him or experiencing his gracious hospitality.