

3rd Sunday in Lent – March 7, 2021

Text: John 2:13-22

Theme: Lent invites us to see God in the disruptions.

Temper tantrums. Losing it. Going off the deep end. Ranting and raving. Those are phrases used to describe expressions (or outbursts) of anger. Even though we recognize anger as an emotion we all experience, expressing that anger in an appropriate, let alone healthy way, is quite challenging. Aristotle once wrote: *Anybody can become angry - that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way - that is not within everybody's power and is not easy.* Ralph Waldo Emerson said: *For every minute you remain angry, you give up sixty seconds of peace of mind.* And Robert Green Ingersoll put it this way: *Anger is a wind which blows out the lamp of the mind.* Or how about this one from Alfred Montapert - *Every time you get angry, you poison your own system.* Finally, some advice from Confucius - *“When anger rises, think of the consequences.”*

We get it. Anger is not an easy emotion to deal with. But it is real and if we don't deal with it, letting the anger build up, then there are consequences to that as well. So, with all of our issues with anger, how comfortable are we with our gospel story for today? It certainly seems that Jesus is angry. He makes a whip of cords, drives out the animals, overturns the tables of the money changers, and shouts, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!” In the other gospels, “The Cleansing of the Temple” includes the accusation of being a “den of robbers,” comes at the end of Jesus' ministry, and becomes the impetus for the chief priests and scribes to look for a way to kill Jesus. But in our gospel, this incident happens at the beginning of Jesus' ministry right after he has performed the first sign of turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana. There is no accusation of cheating the people. AND the response by the Jewish authorities is to ask for a sign to show them why Jesus was doing this.

All of this makes me wonder – perhaps this isn't an angry outburst from Jesus, upset at unjust practices; rather a disruption of their carefully orchestrated system in order to help them see God in new ways – not within the structure of their temple, but in Jesus and his ministry among the people. And perhaps that is what we are invited to do as well– to see God in the

disruptions. And so the theme of my sermon this morning is this: Lent invites us to see God in the disruptions.

When we read about people selling animals and the money changers at their tables, we assume that what upset Jesus were practices that cheated and took advantage of people who were coming to the temple to worship. But in John's version of this story, there is no indication of that. Rather what is described is a carefully prescribed system that made it easier for pilgrims to participate in worship at the temple. Of course, you wouldn't want to drag a cow, sheep or even doves a long distance. You needed a convenient and easy way to purchase the animals for sacrifices so you could worship in the proper way. And you wouldn't want to put Roman coins, with the head of Caesar stamped into the coin, into the offering plate. You needed a way to get the correct coins to worship in the correct way. Why not have these services right there at the temple? If you think about it, it was not that dissimilar to many of our worship practices that help people participate by making sure they have bulletins or other things such as candles on Christmas Eve, a climate- controlled building, music provided by an organist and choir, a way to give electronically. You could argue – well people don't have to pay for these conveniences. But someone has to make sure all those things are provided and there is a cost. In Jesus' day, it was a well-thought out, carefully planned system to make sure worship of the holy, almighty God happened in the correct, structured way. What is wrong with that?

Thinking that our well-thought out, carefully planned systems are the primary ways to experience and worship God. In other words, thinking that we can control where and how God is present; that God could be contained in a building, even if it is a temple. And to make that point, Jesus disrupts the systems – literally turns the tables upside down – and declares in answer to the question about what “sign” he can show for doing this, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” To which the gospel explains – he was speaking of the temple of his body; not a temple made out of stone and constructed by human hands, but a temple that is a human body. God dwelling now in humanity – the incarnation.

Over the past year – it has been almost an entire year – our lives have been totally disrupted by this pandemic and we have learned the very hard way that we are not in control. Even with all of our scientific knowledge, our resources, our structures, we were not able to stop the spread of this virus from infecting millions of people and are just now with vaccines and continuing to practice public health measures perhaps beginning to turn the tide. Now I want to be clear that I do not believe God swept down from heaven and caused this virus to disrupt our lives and shake us up to teach us a lesson. The question for us to wrestle with is not what caused this virus – it is a virus – but how we respond when our lives are disrupted. Rather than getting angry, lashing out at others, refusing to make accommodations to others because it doesn't fit into our plans, is it possible to widen our perspectives and assumptions to see God at work in new and different ways, to see God outside our structures and systems, to see God in humanity, the human bodies all around us?

I believe that is what this Jesus was challenging the people in his day to do when he turned things upside down. Rather than thinking you have God figured out, contained with your temple structure and system, see God all around you, within you, within others. And I believe that is what Lent invites us to do as well. We add practices that disrupt our normal ways of doing things, prayer that disrupts our constant activity so that we can simply be still and sit with God, fasting that disrupts our consumption in attempts to fill up our needs; acts of charity that disrupt our fears of scarcity and need to put ourselves first. Disrupting our agendas and plans, our egos and fears, our illusion that we are in control in many ways forces us to ask – now what? And the now what that Jesus invites us into is God, who is present and active out in the world, in our humanity, in our lives, and in the lives of our neighbors.

This is incredible good news – God is not contained somewhere, someplace disconnected from our daily lives, only accessible to those who do or say the right things. Rather God is present in Jesus, in a human body, in humanity for God so loved this world, for God so loves us, for God so wants to be bring new life even in the midst of destruction, even in the midst of disruptions.

The invitation for us is to not only see this truth of God's presence and activity among us but to trust and participate in it. That means, even in the future when we can all gather again in our buildings, we don't stay in our buildings, but we connect with our communities, our neighbors to share God's love with them. That means that instead of just dismissing people and ideas that don't fit our assumptions, we take the time to listen to what God might be saying through them. That means that wherever we go, whatever we do – we are bearers of God. How do our actions and words reflect that reality? How do our actions and words reflect that when our plans get disrupted?

It is hard not to react to all the disruptions and challenges of this past year with anger and frustration. I would like to be able to make some plans and know that they can actually happen without worrying about another surge of the virus. I would like to be able to watch the news without hearing about more instances of violence, racial inequity and disparities that continue to force us to question how our society is structured. But here we are and here God is. So let's take a deep breath, let go of our agendas, and dare to embrace God's agenda, seeing what new things might happen when God is at loose in the world turning things upside down. Amen