

3rd Lent B

March 4, 2015

Church of the Advent

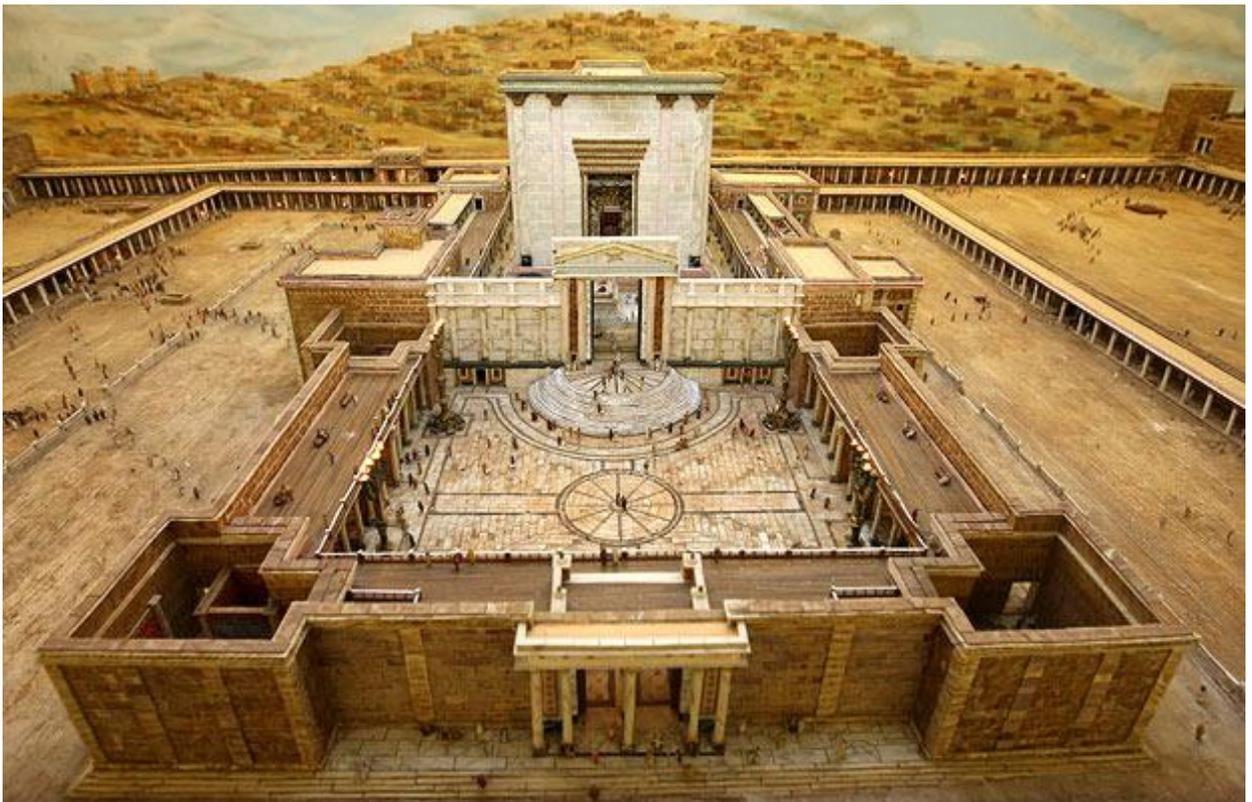
What in the world?

What in the world has gotten into you? Does anyone remember a time in your life when—if truth be told—you weren't really acting like yourself, and someone—a parent or grandparent or someone else who knew you well asked this question? It was probably asked with some puzzlement, and an understanding that something must be going on underneath the surface to have set you off to behaving so foolishly and out of character. Of course, someone *might* have asked you this if you were doing something uncharacteristically *good*, or sounding like Eddie Haskell from *Leave it to Beaver*. But it was much more likely to come up when you had been behaving *badly*, with that tone that says *you really know better, right?*

This is the first question I had in mind to ask Jesus the first time I heard today's gospel from John. Jesus, whom we know and love, and to whom we pray, and from whom we live and move and have our being, is on a *tear* in this story, and it is just a little unsettling. The disciples have followed Jesus into Jerusalem, to the outer courtyard of the Temple—the center of Jewish life and worship—and then they watch him *lose it*. This story at the Temple is found in all four gospels, which gives it credibility and makes it important. Matthew, Mark and Luke place this story at the end of Jesus' ministry in the world, just before he is arrested, allowing our imagination to see this public display of bad behavior as the final provocation for the Jewish authorities to have him arrested. John places it at the *beginning* of his journey, and uses it as John uses many stories, to identify and highlight that Jesus is the Son of God who has come to save the world—and with this kind of entrance he couldn't help but make an impression.

The basic context of the story is the celebration of the Passover—a commemoration of the time when God helped Moses lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, escaping the death of their first born sons by painting their doorposts with the blood of a lamb as instructed, so the angel of the Lord would *pass over* their households

leaving them free to escape. What they didn't know at the time is that they were heading for 40 years in the wilderness, but at least they were out from under Pharaoh. Ever since arriving and making their home in the Promised Land of Canaan, having built a Temple with the instructions first given to David and Solomon by the Lord God to honor the one true Yahweh, the Jews had made pilgrimage to the Temple each Passover to bring their sacrifices and say their prayers. Even when the Temple was destroyed at the time of their exile in Babylon, they held the dream of rebuilding it—and did so when they returned to Jerusalem. They came from all over the land to this central place to affirm their identity as God's chosen people, and then participated in the ritual sacrifices as determined by the priests and written into the Law.



Because some of them traveled a great distance on foot, it was not possible to bring from their homes the living animals required to be sacrificed, so a kind of commerce had developed just inside the gates of the Temple where worshipers could purchase a lamb or goat or a pair of turtle doves—whatever they could afford and was

required of them. These live sacrifices were then presented to the priests, who would kill the animal and burn its flesh—after some of it was offered to sustain the priests—the only people considered worthy enough to eat the meat from a sacrifice. It was thought that the smoke from the burning sacrifices would then rise to Yahweh and be pleasing to him.

The money changers in the Temple courtyard were functioning—at least in their own minds—in holy work, making sure everyone had what they needed to get the job done and keep all participants on God’s good list for another year. I see them as sort of an ancient altar guild—just wanting to help everyone to get everything done just right—though it is more likely they were *collecting* silver than polishing it, and they certainly felt entitled to their cut. Imagine coming to a church full of sheep and cattle and birds, all lowing and cooing generally causing an anxious, smelly mess, with their noise covering over the lending and the borrowing, the exchanging of currencies, and the bargaining for price, much like a marketplace for access to God’s grace. And then here comes Jesus, like he owns the place, furiously whipping up the animals to free them and drive them out of the gates, upending the tables and the commerce, and yelling at the brokers of sacrifice that their “zeal for their house” was missing the whole point. Jesus was passionate and probably confusing, and probably looked a little crazy as he leaped right over the edge. What *had* gotten into Jesus that day?

The message here, in this violent, out-of-character clean-out that Jesus performed, and his declaration that he *himself* was the Temple, is a message of challenge for us to think about how and where we look for God. Remember, for a long time the Israelites believed that God literally lived within the Ark of the Covenant, a box small enough to be carried on long poles by two men, and which sat isolated in the innermost room of the Temple, the holiest of places allowing only the holiest of men—the High Priest—to approach it—usually just once a year. The closest the common people were allowed to get to it was in the ritual of buying an animal, and then turning it over to the professionals to sacrifice it for them. As it was, there were layers of access to the Temple. Gentiles could not get past the front entrance. Women could not go in as far as men. And men with higher status in the hierarchy of leadership could go farther

in to the center than their underlings. And the Ark of the Covenant was in the very unreachable deep center of this enormous structure that took up the equivalent of several city blocks. And everyone who moved in and out and through the Temple were operating under the assumption that they were following the proper letter of the Law—the Law that was given by God to Moses in its purest form centuries earlier on Mount Sinai. But a lot had been lost in translation. The Law had developed into a sea of rules governing every aspect of their lives—from who and how they married, to what and how they ate, dressed, washed their hands, raised and prepared their livestock and crops for food, how they behaved on the Sabbath. It had stretched into purity codes, which left the sick, the blind, the lame, the poor, and childbearing women in a terminal status of being unclean, untouchable, and unworthy of attention. The Law had evolved into a vehicle for insiders to prosper and outsiders to languish, and the Temple had become a place where worship of God had evolved into a place that demonstrated form over substance, procedure over meaning, order over healing, Law over love.

Jesus was trying to change that paradigm. By tearing up the infrastructure for this old and ineffective way of reaching God—as if God lived in a specific physical place—Jesus was pointing away from the physical Temple and to himself, giving the people a new focus for worship that they did not yet understand. He was showing that they could not *buy* God’s grace and forgiveness, because through Jesus it would be given to them as *free gift*. And when the temple of his body was destroyed in its crucifixion, it would be raised on the third day. Jesus was telling the people to turn around and re-focus their attention *away* from the old Temple and *towards* himself—away from a place of ritual sacrifice and toward a place of prayer and healing for those with withered hands, and unsteady legs, and for those possessed with demons who howled and bruised themselves with stones, and for all those who were poor and oppressed and broken and isolated and alone.

What in the world had gotten into Jesus? Nothing short of show-stopping radical love. His message was that *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life*, and that took some drama to be believed. And that is why we re-create that drama every time we break the bread together in the Eucharist, and why we welcome seekers to the table with

us—no matter where they have come from or how far they have come, and why we are called to go out and take this Good News of radical love outside the walls of our Temples and into the world.

Perhaps there are times and places where we are even called to turn over a few tables, to ask some questions, and to offer another way of looking at how we do our business of relating to each other as God's people in the world. If we truly believe Jesus—that *he* is our Temple—that has been torn down and raised in three days—then our zeal for living into his radical and self-giving love might even get us from time to time so fired up, so engaged, so foolish, and so self-sacrificing in loving one another as we have been commanded to do, that people will say, *what in the world has gotten into them?* Let it be so. AMEN