

January 16, 2022

John 2: 13-22

Make God Known

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

Sermon and Scripture

Be present. This advice is given to busy parents, encouraging us to set aside our phones, our office emails, and all the things we are worried about, and turn our full attention to the young people right in front of us who desperately need to be seen and heard.

Be present. This is the advice I give to people who want to help people who are grieving but are afraid they will say or do the wrong thing. Sometimes the only thing any of us can do is just be there. Sit in the same room, listening to memories, reliving the “lasts,” inhabiting the silence.

Be present. **What do you think of when you hear these words?**

Psalm 46 is one of my favorite psalms. It begins, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. ²Therefore we will not fear...” And the psalmist goes on to list the times in which we will not fear. Scripture assures us that God is present in all times and places. Our faith tradition teaches us that we can encounter God anywhere, here in this sanctuary, at home in front of a screen, outside on a walk, or alone in a closet. God is present everywhere, all the time. I believe this is true, although in my own experience, there are places and times that God seems nearer, where it is clear to me that God is present.

Does that resonate with you? Are their places in which God feels closer or more accessible to you?

In the ancient Jewish tradition, the temple was such a place. In fact, it was *the* place where God promised to always meet the people. The Torah, in Deuteronomy, commands the Jewish people to make pilgrimage to the temple three times a year. One of those designated times was Passover. Passover happens in the spring and celebrates the Israelites’ liberation from Egypt. The Holy heard the people’s cries and led them to freedom. Today’s story is the first of three Passover stories in the Gospel of John. **Anna, will you read it?**

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² 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.

As I mentioned before, this story of Jesus disrupting the temple is found in all four gospels. In the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the story follows Jesus's entrance into Jerusalem, which we celebrate on Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter. In John, the story is right after Jesus's first sign, the story we read last week of Jesus turning water to wine at the Wedding in Cana. In each gospel, the story serves a different purpose in the gospel's larger narrative and because of that, each story is interpreted differently. From a timeline standpoint, the authors of John would have had access to at least some of the other gospels and the benefit of a lot of time in which to tweak the story.

In the synoptic gospels, the story functions as the last straw as far as the authorities were concerned. It was this story in Matthew, Mark, and Luke that had the authorities trying to figure out how to get rid of Jesus. In John, though, we will see in a few weeks that the last straw was the raising of Lazarus. So, if the authors of John didn't use this story as the impetus for Jesus's arrest, what purpose does it serve?

There is more than one answer to that question, but the most obvious is that the story introduces the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish establishment. Rather than waiting until late in the story to see how dangerous what Jesus was doing was, and how he was perceived by Jewish leaders, the authors of John put it right out there at the beginning of his public ministry.

This conflict present in this story and the ways in which the conflict will escalate in the pages to follow, would have resonated with the people within the community from which this text came. They were no strangers to disagreeing with Jewish leaders. They were in very good company and certainly, in that respect, they were following in the ways of Jesus. But it would not have been pleasant or easy to try to live into what they believed, knowing their beliefs made “the other” as far as Jewish tradition was concerned.

I know Christians who have experienced pretty much the same thing. I’ve heard a lot of stories from people who grew up being taught certain things about God, Jesus, and faith, and then when they got older, they questioned those things, and even rejected some or all of them. They talk about how disorienting and scary it is to deconstruct everything they thought was true. I experienced some of that in seminary. There were a lot of things I went into seminary believing that I later discovered I didn’t believe.

Did you have that experience?

The thing about a person’s theology is that when one thing changes, it often feels like a house of cards...everything sort of folds up. “If I longer believe this, then this can’t be true for me either.” It can leave people feeling unmoored, kind of without an anchor. It’s especially scary when your family or your church community reacts badly to those changes. Sometimes the reaction is an intentional distancing from the person whose beliefs have changed., “Your beliefs no longer align with ours. You are wrong and we cannot risk being associated with you.” Families, churches, and friend circles just kind of kick them to the curb. They no longer get invited to family holiday dinners. The people at their church pray for them but will not welcome them in their community any longer.

For the life of me, I don’t get it. I am unsure of a lot of things about God, but I don’t doubt for a minute that there is room for all of us, for our doubts and our questions, in the kin-dom of God. God connects with each of us in different ways. We ought to affirm all the ways. If you are someone who senses the Holy’s presence when you are outside, spend lots of time there, even if you miss corporate worship. If you feel divine energy when you are holding a crystal, get a whole bunch of them and put them in every room of your house, your office, and your car. If your heart feels at home when you light a candle and sit quietly

staring at the flame, do that...all the time. I promise, however you are reaching for God, God is reaching back. God wants all people to know God's presence and love. You can't do it wrong! Meanwhile, back at the temple...

At first glance, this story seems to be about there being something wrong with the business being transacted at the temple. Jesus saw what was happening and disrupted it all; he turned over tables and used a whip to drive the animals out. Luther Seminary scholar, Dr. Karoline Lewis, reminds us that the business itself was not what John's Jesus was upset about. She writes, "...for the temple system to survive, the ordered transactions of a marketplace were essential. The temple had to function as a place of exchange for maintaining and supporting the sacrificial structures required for preserving a relationship with God". In this story, Jesus was not quibbling about mishandling money or necessarily accusing anyone of ripping people off; he was calling for the whole system to be dismantled. Dr. Lewis continues, "Underneath the critique lies the intimation that the temple itself is not necessary. At the center of such theological statements is the fundamental question of God's location, which will be confirmed by the dialogue between Jesus and the Jewish authorities."¹

In Jesus's critique, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace," it is easy to speed by the way in which Jesus refers to the temple, "My Father's house." The phrase "my Father" is used by John's Jesus about twenty-five times throughout the Gospel. For John's community, "my Father" indicates Jesus's singular identity and authority as the divine Son and his unique affiliation to God as Father. For that community, it was this distinctive relationship that gave Jesus the authority to rearrange the furniture in the temple.

So, when the Jewish authorities asked Jesus for a sign that he had the right to do what he was doing, Jesus was the sign. He answered, although it's almost a non-answer, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." This foreshadowing of the resurrection is interpreted for the readers by the narrator. Jesus was talking about his own body as the temple, and he was essentially saying to the Jewish leaders that he was the presence and revelation of God. "In me, God is right here, right in front of you. I am making God known." And this was very good news because this community of Jewish people no longer had access to the temple. They were not welcome.

¹ Lewis, Karoline, *Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries: John*, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2014, 42.

In light of last night's scary situation at the Jewish temple outside of Dallas and the many ways in which the Gospel of John has been used to promote anti-semitism, I want to be sure y'all get this: The authors of John were writing to encourage and bolster the faith of a community that had been ostracized by Jewish leaders. Their real problem was not that Judaism was bad (they considered themselves Jewish), but that they were excluded from community. The authors were trying to say, "You have Jesus...you will be okay without the temple."

Rather than understanding John's version of this story as a negative statement against temple activity, we might understand it as a positive statement about Jesus' identity and role in the Gospel of John. Jesus appeared in Jerusalem making a bold statement not so much "against" anything as much as "for" his authority to represent and reveal the God of the temple, whom he knows intimately as his Father.² The original readers would have read and heard this story as a strong affirmation of their faith in Jesus. What a source of hope this must have been for that weary community.

There is a message of hope here for us as well, even though Jesus is not turning over tables right in front of us today, I assure you, the days of God revealing Godself to humanity are not behind us. Jesus was not God's final revelation. Certainly, that was easy to see in the life of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Like Jesus, Dr. King spent his life revealing the ways of God: the ways of justice, inclusion, and community, to a world that much of the time didn't want to hear it. We can see the revelation of God in the wisdom of Desmond Tutu, the sacrifice of Bishop Oscar Romero, the poetry of Maya Angelou, and even the humor and boldness of Golden Girl, Betty White.

God is, indeed, still revealing Godself to us today, and most of the time the people doing the revealing don't have a microphone to their mouth or a camera on them. They aren't famous at all. They are just people, people created in the image of God, choosing to love, choosing to make justice happen, choosing to sacrifice their resources for the common good. People just like you!

² Ruiz, Gilberto, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/cleansing-the-temple/commentary-on-john-213-25-2>, accessed, January 14, 2022.

God is present, dear ones, present in you and around you. It's your job to show the world who God is, and you may have to turn a table or two over to get their attention. I would love to hear how you will make God known this week. Amen.