

Altered From the Inside

John 2:13-22

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Someone once did a study to determine the life of a sermon—how long a sermon is remembered after it is preached. The results, I recall, were sobering for those of us who do this on a regular basis. The results were in terms of hours and days at best. By the next Sunday, most sermons are, as they say, history.

Even if you forgot every word Jesus said, you would not forget what he did on the day he visited the temple in Jerusalem. One commentator on this story said that it makes the preacher and the congregation a little queasy.

You won't find many pictures of this event hanging on the walls of Sunday school classes alongside the popular images of a gentle Jesus with children or carrying a lamb in his arms. In fact, there aren't many artistic attempts to portray it all.

Rembrandt did it. It's an incredibly strong, almost disturbing painting—chaotic, turbulent, angry, tables falling, dogs barking, religious leaders looking on in splendid isolation, and at the center, striking out with a whip, a strong, muscular, determined man, Jesus.

This story: it's complicated. It begins with the Roman Empire. Its three main characters are Jesus, of course, and two others, one of whom is already dead, Herod the King, and Caiaphas the High Priest.

King Herod was a half-hearted Jew, and his survival strategy was to be more Roman than the Romans themselves. He built and built big: seven palaces for himself, each larger than the emperor's palace in Rome. He built cities and fortresses, and you can see scattered ruins all over Israel today. He is best known for one of the most ambitious construction projects in history, started twenty years before the birth of Christ called the *Herodium*. Herod literally built a mountain with a fortified palace on top in Jerusalem, where he planned to be buried.

It took forty-six years to build, and it was, by all accounts, a knockout—big, elegant, an architectural and aesthetic phenomenon. There were walls and towers and grand staircases, and the temple itself was made of white marble. It took your breath away, and Jewish people from all over the world traveled to Jerusalem to see it and be there for the special feasts and festivals, especially for Passover. Every male within a 15-mile radius was required by law to come to Jerusalem for Passover, and tens of thousands of Jews scattered throughout the Roman empire made the pilgrimage at great personal cost.

The people in charge of Herod's temple—its maintenance and everything that happened in it—were the priests, the clergy. And the head of the operation was the chief priest. His name is Caiaphas. The Romans, who were pretty smart about controlling a hostile population, actually allowed the temple operation to levy and collect its own taxes. Caiaphas is incredibly good at his job. He has very cordial relations with the current king, Antipas, who is old Herod's son, and he counts on the king to keep everything on an even keel with the Romans.

One more important detail. The way you worship God in Israel during this time is by sacrifice. It's deep in the tradition, all the way back to Abraham. The way to thank God for God's mercy and steadfast love, for the gift of your life and the lives of your children, is by making a sacrifice of something that is precious to you. You give it back to the Lord.

Sometimes it is a portion of grain. But it's usually an animal. The priest slaughters it and burns it on an altar and the smoke rises into the heavens and God is pleased. The

theology, if not the specifics, continues to be at the heart of Jewish and Christian worship today. In our worship liturgy, we bring our gifts to God in gratitude for God's love for us.

Now something as noisy and messy as animal sacrifice requires some rules and regulations. That's where the priests come back in. Someone has to make sure the sacrifice is appropriate. You can't just bring in a sick, lame lamb; it has to be a good one. So, there are inspectors. And if you don't have a lamb or a pigeon—and most pilgrims didn't—you ought to be able to buy one. So, there is a small livestock market.

The historians tell us that one of the innovations Caiaphas came up with was to bring all of that inside the temple—for convenience and where it could be controlled—inside the outer temple court, the Court of the Gentiles, where non-Jews were welcome to visit and pray.

But there was hardly room for Gentiles because the court had become such a crowded marketplace. There were tables, a currency exchange where you could exchange Roman coins for shekels, the only money with which you could pay your temple tax. Next were the inspection tables to ensure that the sacrifice you brought along was acceptable. Finally, the livestock dealers where you could buy, depending on how much money you had, a pigeon, a pair of turtledoves, a lamb, a calf, even a full-grown bull. Then, up several flights of stairs, was the altar where the sacrifice was consummated. Caiaphas had turned Passover into a huge profit-making business, collaborating with the Roman authorities to pull it off.

That's what Jesus saw when he came to the temple that day—the chaos and noise—but don't you also imagine that he saw the whole system behind it: Herod who tried to kill him when he was a baby (surely his parents told him about that); Caiaphas, who knew how to keep the politicians happy? Don't you imagine Jesus was terribly disappointed and offended and then angry that this beautiful court had become a marketplace?

What happened next was spectacular. "Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple . . . sheep and cattle. He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!'"

Jesus in the temple is standing in a long and honorable line of prophets who, centuries earlier, thundered against corrupt religion, religion that has lost its way, religion co-opted to support somebody's political, social, or financial agenda. Hosea, Micah, and Amos: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

I think in this story Jesus is admonishing us to be careful about collaborating with political power. Be wary when the king builds you a temple. It is no secret that when political tyrants begin to seize and consolidate power, one of the first things they do is co-opt religion or stamp it out, jail prophets, shut down churches. Herod was an expert at it—co-opting religion.

Roman emperors finally concluded that it was better to try to convince Christian leaders to cooperate than persecute, better to enlist the church in support of the empire. Kings of England created a church, appointed their own archbishops, and expected support and cooperation, and when the church leaders refused, the kings martyred them. Thomas Becket, for instance.

David French, writing in the New York Times last Sunday, worries about the rise of a perverted form of Christianity in our country that has come to be known as Christian Nationalism. He quotes sociologists Samuel Perry and Andrew Whitehead who define Christian nationalism as a "cultural framework that blurs distinctions between Christian identity and American identity, viewing the two as closely related and seeking to enhance and preserve their union."

In 2022, a coalition of right-wing writers and leaders published a document called “National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles.” Its section on God and public religion states: “Where a Christian majority exists, public life should be rooted in Christianity and its moral vision, which should be honored by the state and other institutions both public and private.” That’s an extraordinary — and ominous — ideological statement, one that would immediately relegate non-Christians to second-class status. It’s utterly contrary to the First Amendment and would impose a form of compelled deference to Christianity on both religious minorities and the nonreligious. Theologically, it’s heretical.

The story of Jesus and the money changers in the temple should make us wary whenever religion becomes too comfortable with political power, wary whenever politicians co-opt religion for ideological purposes and, on the other side of it, when religion claims with absolute certainty that it knows God’s political preference. This story should remind us of the wisdom of Abraham Lincoln, who said we should never claim that God is on our side politically but pray that we might be on God’s side.

This story ought to suggest that there are times and occasions when anger is an appropriate response to injustice and evil. Jesus was clearly angry at what he saw happening to the religion and temple he loved, angry for his people, poor people, common people, exploited by systems over which they had no control.

So yes, when Jesus cracks that whip and angrily overturns tables, he makes us uncomfortable, just as what he did must have made his contemporaries, his followers, uncomfortable and afraid. What he did in the temple, most scholars agree, was the act that sealed his fate. In Dorothy Sayers’ good words from a generation ago: “Officialdom felt that the established order of things would be more secure without him. So, they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness.”

And yet, is there not something compelling about Jesus in this story, something beautiful and passionate and strong, something that makes us *want* to be brave and less patient with injustice, more willing to speak up, take a stand, turn over a few tables?

Is there not something compelling and attractive in this Lord who throws caution to the wind and risks offending all the powers to do what he has to do? Is there not something powerfully important to you and me about this Lord who will go to the cross because of his uncompromising commitments and his uncompromising trust in God, this Lord who bids us today to take up a cross and follow?

And is there not something provocative about this Lord who barges into the temple and turns everything upside down and, who knows, might barge into your life and mine, not wait patiently to be invited in, but might barge in and, in your life and mine, overturn a few tables? Who knows?