

GOD GETS CLOSE

John 2:13-22

Violence is not seen as a good way to solve matters. The concern over the attack on the congress at the capitol in January is rooted in how the founding fathers made sure that the elected president was head of the military and that the members of the military take an oath not to a leader, but to the constitution. After World War 2, peace was cemented by giving aid to the former enemies in Germany and Japan, turning them into friends and allies, not subjected people. The civil rights movement worked when people rallied in non-violent and failed when people rioted. We are told that anger can be good, but only when it is targeted against bad things, like Covid-19, instead of other people.

However violent means can appeal to us when it quickly gets rid of what is threatening us. On TV heroes can use violent means to solve the problems quickly during the time allotted to the show. There is a famous scene in “Raiders of the Lost Ark” where a huge, expert swordsman juggles his sword in front of the character, Indiana Jones played by Harrison Ford. You expect Jones to have to fight him hand-to-hand. But instead he pulls out his revolver and shoots him. It came out that the script called for the hand-to-hand fight, but Ford was exhausted by the heat of filming in Egypt and pulled out the revolver. They left it in. We cheer on because quickly the hero solves the problem.

Our worship this morning centers on the story of Jesus clearing out the temple. He seems to violently chase out the evil people who are making a profit out of the poor. We can cheer Him as He goes after the bad guys. But then we miss what is really happening.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke this story is set during Holy Week, between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. But our lesson today is from John’s Gospel. John tells this story early on in Jesus’ ministry. Did John get this wrong or did Jesus do this twice? We don’t know, but we can see is that the other Gospels are emphasizing that Jesus is riling up His enemies so that they will condemn Him to death. But in John, Jesus makes the connection to the temple with these words, “Destroy this temple, and I will build it up in three days.” What does that mean for us?

The temple in Jerusalem was built by King Solomon. Then it was destroyed by the Babylonians. It had been rebuilt by the Jews after they returned from exile in Babylon 400 years before Jesus’ time. But it was a poor imitation of Solomon’s building.

Before Jesus’ birth the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, had made his friend Herod, ruler over Israel. But Herod was not a Jew. To win the people over to him, he began to “renovate” the temple. I put “renovate” in quotes because it was much more than that. To start with, Herod saw that the temple was built on a steep hill. There was not much level ground to build a big structure. So Herod made a retaining wall of huge stones that still exist and back

filled it to create a huge platform. This left a very spacious area to not only put in the building, but a huge courtyard around it. Around the courtyard was a covered porch area. It was made of white stone that gleamed high on the hill on which it was set. That is why a person would always “go up” to Jerusalem and the temple. It was so massive a building project that when Jesus came it was still being worked on 46 years later from when Herod started.

So when Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and I will build it up in three days,” it was a shocking thing in two ways—how could He talk such a way about God’s temple and how could He do it in three days?

John notes that after Jesus rose from the dead on Easter that the disciples remembered these words and realized He was not talking about the temple, but His own body resurrected from the dead. This fits into what John says at the beginning of his Gospel when he says about Jesus, “The Word (God’s Son) became flesh and dwelt among us.” The word “dwelt” can be translated as “tented,” a reference to the tabernacle, the tent that God had Moses built which preceded Solomon’s temple. John is saying that God in Jesus has decided to make Himself the temple. Why? For the same reason that there was a tabernacle and later a temple—so that God can dwell among His people.

In the Old Testament God is seen as “holy.” “Holy” does not mean that just that god is perfect. It means that He is “other” than us. We can travel at the speed of light and it would take us billions of years to get to the outside of the universe—that is if the speed of light is fast enough to catch the universe as it expands. Our whole bodies would tear apart instantly as we approach a black hole—and there is no escape from it. Yet, God is greater and beyond all of that. In the presence of the holy God we would be totally overwhelmed. Why is the reaction of people in the Bible in the presence of God always fear?

This holy God reveals Himself at various times in the Old Testament—a glimpse here and there. But it is too much for people. The people at Mt. Sinai ask God to come to them by Moses, the prophet, because God is too much for them. These glimpses of God are called His “glory.” God had the people make the tabernacle so He could show His holiness through His glory. The tabernacle was the connection point between God and humans. It was how people could really experience God.

But God in His love gives us His fullest glory not in a volcano, a thunderstorm, or earthquake, but in a human—Jesus Christ. God wants to get close and personal with us, so He became one of us in Jesus.

That is why Jesus got so angry in the temple. It was not that He was against the buying and selling itself, but that it was being done in the temple. God wanted to have people get close to Him. The courtyard in which they bought and sold animals was called the “Court of the

Gentiles.” Anyone could go in there as long as they carried no pagan image, like a Roman coin, inside of it. The Roman government, to keep peace with Jews, made it a capital offense to violate that law. In that court many Gentiles came and worshiped the true God. But all the buying and selling distracted from that. Such is God’s love for us, such is His desire to get close to all people, that Jesus reacted as He did. Or as the Old Testament said in prophecy, “Zeal for His Father’s house consumed Him.”

That is the kind of God we have, a God who wants to get close to us. But so often we prefer our distance. We say that we should get angry at evil things, not evil people. But often what is motivating us is that we don’t want to get involved. We want to keep those things at a safe distance. We forget that evil is not something “out there.” It is inside of us.

Our Old Testament lesson gives us the Ten Commandments. These aren’t just arbitrary rules to keep us in our place. They are how we live in relationship to God and each other. They are meant to draw us closer to God and each other. But the sin inside of us not only makes us break those commands, it twists them into either laws that we can manipulate to try to control God and others or they are the harsh commands of a God we think is unfair. That is why Jesus got angry, angry enough to really do something about the evil and sin in our lives. He became God’s temple among us, God getting totally immersed in the mess of our sins so that He could die with them on the cross.

God won’t let us keep Him at a safe distance. He wants to get “up close and personal” with us. And He does so in Jesus, who cleared the temple and wants to upset and clear out our lives so He can live in us.