

## ON CHANGING MONEY, LIVES AND TEMPLES

JOHN 2:13-22

Beware the Ides of March, especially when the Revised Common Lectionary gives us the story of Jesus clearing the temple in John's Gospel. In the Roman calendar, the Ides of March marks the mid-point of the month. It is translated "half division" and is thought to be "the day of the full moon."

Somewhere in the background "Age of Aquarius" from the musical *Hair* is playing: "When the moon is in the seventh house, and Mercury aligns with Mars," because stuff happens on the Ides of March. In years past, the Ides of March were dedicated to the Roman god Mars. A festival was held in his honor. Since then, the date is associated with Julius Caesar's brutal murder in 44 BCE that followed his self-appointment as dictator for life. On the Ides of March, Caesar is ambushed in the Senate chamber by a group of Senators who thought of themselves as "Liberators."

I remember this, because I had freshmen lit in high school. In Shakespeare's rendering of the story, a soothsayer appears bidding Caesar to "beware the Ides of March." Caesar instructs Brutus to "set him before me; let me see his face," and Brutus does. The soothsayer repeats himself, "Beware the Ides of March." Caesar then dismisses him saying, "He is a dreamer; let us leave him." The truth is that this man is a dreamer, and his dream becomes, for Caesar, a nightmare. Caesar is betrayed by those who are closest to him. The question is haunting; the consequence final. Et tu, Brute? Then fall, Caesar. Et tu, Brute? Your time is coming...

Now here we are, Christ's body, the church, gathered to worship on this third of six Sundays in Lent. It is a kind of mid-point. For those of us who put together the liturgy Lord's Day after Lord's Day, the glass is half-empty or half-full (depending on your disposition); and for those of you who find yourself fantasizing about coffee or chocolate or fast food (whatever it is that you gave up for Lent), take a deep breath...relax...we are almost there!

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3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year B*

Sometimes it is easy to forget that Caesar's story unfolds before Christ's (and maybe we should blame this on Shakespeare), and yet the parallels are striking. In John's Gospel, the Passover of the Jews is near. Passover, in Jewish traditions, begins with a full moon. The story being remembered in the observance of this festival is, of course, Israel's exodus from Egypt. Between Egypt and Canaan, God gives the Law to Moses. This Law is to serve as an oasis in the desert, as a reminder to all covenant people that God is with us until the end.

In this story, Jesus makes bold pronouncements, like calling the temple his parent's house and speaking of his body as if it will be resurrected, both of which raise the ire of religious and political authorities. Who does he think he is: the son of God? Apparently so!

In this setting, Jesus functions as his own soothsayer. He knows to beware. He feels death coming, and he knows that his betrayer will come from among those gathered in the most intimate of chambers, the place where bread is broken and wine is poured.

Wouldn't you like to know what Jesus dreams and if his dreams feel more like dreams or nightmares to him? Obviously, he has visions of death and betrayal. He is frustrated by the extent to which his person and work are reduced to statistics, to cattle, sheep, doves and cash. Still, his confidence in being resurrected comes from somewhere. He is clearly undergirded by this promise, by the possibility of the temple of his body being raised up in three days (when the temple has been under construction for forty-six years). Beneath the threat of death is the hope of resurrection.

This story is threatening in many ways, sometimes, I think, in ways that it is not intended to be. One of the strangest sermons that I have ever heard was preached on this text. The subject was anger: Jesus' anger. The logic went something like this: Jesus was angry, and we should be, too. Because Jesus was angry, anger is justified. Go ahead and seethe.

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Agreed: anger is part of being human. In Scripture, prophetic work is often charged with righteous indignation, and Jesus is definitely angry when clearing the temple. However, let us be careful about assuming that all anger is justified. Anger begets hatred and may lead to abuse. Bury anger, and deep-seated contempt will grow. Recognizing anger and letting go of it enables us to heal, and perhaps more importantly, to be healed by the Spirit of God at work among us.

No, I am not suggesting that Jesus' biography is somehow tainted by this story in John's Gospel. I am suggesting that you and I are not Jesus, and I feel that it is important to emphasize that Christ is the one who cracks the whip on the money-changers in the temple. His disciples stand by interpreting Jewish tradition. Christ does not call them to be angry or to act violently. He calls them to remember, to remember that "it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'" Then, after he is raised, they remember him saying "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Oh, this temple...this church...this body...the one that was broken and shed for you and for me...

Now the disciples get it: the point of the story was a little fuzzy during Lent. It is much, much clearer after Easter. Lamar Williamson, who is Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at Union-PSCE in Richmond, points out that this story is told earlier in John's Gospel than in the synoptic gospels: "According to John, the setting...is the first of three Passover festivals in Jerusalem during Jesus' public ministry, one at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end...church tradition has seen these as temporal markers that, taken with 'the festival of the Jews (Passover),' have led to the understanding of a three-year ministry for Jesus, over against the synoptics, which mention only the last Passover and associate this temple scene with it."

In this story, the church is being carved out of the synagogue and is increasingly at odds with Rome (which is probably why it is situated more closely to Holy Week in the other gospels). You may have noticed that John does not say why Jesus objects to money being changed in the temple, only that

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he does. Again, Williamson proves helpful by suggesting: “The commerce described... (refers to the fact that)...Jewish pilgrims who came to Jerusalem for Passover needed to buy Passover lambs, and many took advantage of the occasion to offer sacrifices in the temple---animals for the wealthy and doves for the poor” (not unlike animals are purchased to be distributed by Heifer International in churches nowadays, the wealthy purchase oxen, the less endowed chicks).

Roman currency was not accepted, and the exchange rate was considerable. Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to the temple what belongs to the temple (which, in this scenario, is even more). It is what athletics departments call a convenience fee when tickets to a sporting event are purchased online. Or is it more like rent at the Presbyterian House or a season pass to park here during football season? Actually, it is neither, because college sports (as much as it disappoints me to admit it sometimes) are simply forms of entertainment, and all are welcomed to worship here whether you live in the Presbyterian House or set up a barbecue pit in the courtyard every fall.

The problem in the temple, I think, as Jesus understands it, is that God’s grace is being mediated by institution not incarnation, and temple authorities are exploiting the cost of discipleship, which is a cost with which Jesus is all too familiar. May forgive us for forgetting...may God reveal to us the pain that, in truth, is beneath the anger that festers inside of us when we begin to feel entitled to grace that cannot be earned.

Since I have been observing Lent, it seems like our nation is least at odds with rhythm of the liturgical year, and I think that this has everything to do with the economic crisis. In truth, I do not know if the language of “crisis” is too strong or not strong enough, but I do know that the nation has not seemed this fearful in my lifetime before or since 9/11. There is anger on Wall Street. There is fear in the church and the world. Put succinctly, it is Lent, and yet even during Lent, especially during Lent, God’s grace is sufficient. God provides oases in deserts, and feasts between fasts, and it is incumbent on

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us embrace those who are angry and comfort those who are afraid, to drink the drink when it is offered and to feast on the bread as it is given. Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! Amen.

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