



Sermon - March 7, 2021

The storyline of God and humans is long. Before the internet became a source for sharing news, the stories of God were shared by numerous resources. Before television, before the radio, before the printing press, before stained glass windows, before icons were painted, and before scribes wrote down the words of philosophers and theologians, before people chanted songs about God, before people sat around a camp fire and recalled stories told by their ancestors or before stones were stacked in piles to remember that a significant spiritual event had taken place, people found ways to share their concepts and experiences of God. Some of these stories and experiences are captured in the Old and New Testament, and many more stories between God and humankind live outside the boundaries of Jewish and Christian thought. And, there may be stories about God and man that still lay buried beneath mounds of dirt waiting to be told.

Humans carry an innate curiosity and imagination on how to continue the story of God and humans. One might think the story of God and humans would somehow come to an end, yet, the story of God seems to go way beyond my

reach or your reach to have the power to end it. And maybe this stems from humans needing to worship something beyond themselves, and it is this very act of worship which continues the storyline between God and humans. Humans wait to have God revealed.

In the Old and New Testament each story, each event, each parable, and each moment of pondering our place before God is a constant revealing of a supernatural event designed to bring us into the presence of God. In our Exodus story this morning we read about 10 commandments given to a holy man by the name of Moses. As the story is told in Exodus these commandments were given to only one man, Moses, and they were given on a special holy mountain, and marked as a covenant between a tribe of Jews and God. This one event is followed by other holy people, both women and men, along with holy prophets to help mankind make sense of life between each other and God. These moments are called revelations, those parts of life that can't really be explained or understood by our human limitations but point to something or someone beyond ourselves.

Fast forward to the first century A.D., and we find that once again, the story of God will now be revealed through a man named Jesus. John, the Fourth Evangelist, has something to say about Jesus, and he doesn't mind messing with the standard story in order to say it. We are familiar with the story he tells in this week's Gospel reading – Jesus cleansing the Temple – but if we pay attention, we'll realize John doesn't just give his own distinct spin, but actually takes great license with the details, symbolism, and even

chronology of his storytelling. And John does all this for a very good reason.

Let's start with chronology. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus' cleansing of the Temple comes much later in the story, just after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, in what we call Palm Sunday. In fact, this story of Jesus in the temple plays a pivotal role as the "last straw" for Jewish Temple leaders and the Roman leadership who are willing to kill at any cost. Their solution places Jesus at the mercy of the Roman officials where Jesus dies on a cross.

In the Gospel of John, however, today's reading, the author has Jesus throwing people out of the temple right near the beginning of the gospel, following Jesus' first miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding of Cana. Jesus is now going public with his agenda, and the first order of business in the Gospel of John, is to reveal a different way of connecting people to God. Okay, I don't know about you, but the actions of Jesus are equivalent of him coming to St. Paul's one Sunday and throwing the offering plates and communion elements off the altar. We would call 911. Why did he do this? I think John wanted to make one point clear about Jesus, that he was a holy man sent by God to reveal a new way of being with God.

Then comes the symbolism that John brings forward. Notice that Jesus doesn't quote Isaiah (56:7) and Jeremiah (7:11) as he does in Mark 11:17, Matthew 21:13, and Luke 19:46, to accuse his opponents of turning the Lord's house of prayer into a den of robbers, or even suggesting that the main problem was defrauding the poor, or showcasing the

corruption of the Temple leaders. Rather, in John's account, Jesus instead says, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace," calling into question how Jews were now to atone for their sins. The main issue for John is sacrificial law. God was to be revealed outside the temple.

John doesn't waste words or time to present to the public who the man Jesus is. John is branding Jesus as the 'lamb of God, as John the Baptist says in John 1:29, right before he baptizes Jesus. Every author, regardless of the book they write, writes with a theme and purpose, and so does John the Evangelist. John writes from a different viewpoint from the other gospels, because the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke have already been written. John is writing in 70-80 A.D., a full 30-40 years later than the other gospels, so John's take away for this temple cleansing moment is profoundly different than the other gospels. John is emphatically saying, "Jesus is the way, and the temple is no longer necessary to connect man with God."

As you might expect, these words would be shocking to hear or to understand if you are a practicing Jew attending the synagogue or temple. I mean, "How dare any man come into the temple and tear things apart, and claim they are now the 'lamb of God'. The outrage and shock felt by temple leaders and other Jews would be hard to describe, the actions of Jesus would be that shocking.

So, does this story of Jesus entering the temple, making a whip, throwing the moneychangers out onto the street, and claiming to be the 'way' to connect with God, have meaning for us today? As a priest, I suppose the predictable answer

is yes, but do I mean it? I struggle even marching in a parade protesting Black Lives Matter. How am I or you to connect this Scripture text to our lives?

Simply, I believe we have a story tell and live, and that story concerns Jesus. Jesus is showing us in our Scripture lessons today that he came to make an outlandish claim, he was born, he claimed to be God, he died, and he was resurrected. Paul says in I Corinthians, Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified... For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Jesus healed, comforted, blessed, got angry with the religious leaders' and hung out with people on the fringe of life. What is St. Paul's role in following Jesus? What will church look like following the pandemic? Every generation of churchgoers ask questions on how to be more effective Christians. And it is good that St. Paul's gives financial and service aid where it is needed, but does our neighbor know we follow Jesus? And if our neighbor assumes we follow Jesus because of our church building or sign, how will we continue to demonstrate the love of Jesus with those neighbors? For now, we are asked to remain separated from our physical neighbors, but we can pray, we can encourage those people we see, and we can encourage our

neighbors also. Be kind to yourself, and this will lead to being kind to your neighbor. Amen.