3rd Sunday of Lent
Sermon 3.8.15
Scripture: Exodus 20:1-17
John 2:13-22

This story is not about Jews. This incident at the Temple is not about Judaism. Jesus here should not be taken as indicting “the Jews” or subverting Judaism—though that would be an easy mistake to make, perhaps was a mistake ever our gospel writer, “John,” made.

Consider: John’s gospel came late, the latest of the four (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). It came when the known world had almost entirely ceased to be. Rome had cracked down on their Jewish population, had waged war against them for decades now, had destroyed their sacred city, Jerusalem, and their most sacred site, the Temple. They had done all this at least in part because of this new faction of Jews—once called followers of the Way, then mockingly called “Christians,” then straightforwardly called Christians.

(Incidentally, they’re often now called Jewish-Christians so to remind us—we of the contemporary Church—that those earliest followers of Christ, those of the 1st and 2nd generations to follow Christ, were indeed mostly Jews [as Jesus himself was a Jew], and not Jew*ish*, not ambivalent or self-hating or eager to become something other than Jewish, but Jews all: students of the Law, worshipers at the Temple, affirmers that only God is God.)

These followers of the Way, these Jewish-Christians, though: these were in part cause for the imperial wrath come down on Jerusalem and Judea; and for the reason that they’d made themselves even more blasphemous and impossible than those original, regular Jews.

Jews had long, quietly, not obeyed the imperial order to worship Caesar as a god; they’d long made a pact of quiet non-compliance that Rome and they could both tolerate. That is, until these Jewish-Christians began making themselves known. They were uppity and active; they were obvious in their non-compliance. They attracted Rome’s attention, worse Rome’s aggression—twice waging war against the Jews, once from the year 66-70 and again 50 years later in 120.

The number dead was astronomical, almost unbelievable, but that two ancient recorders of history remember similar numbers. Both Josephus and Tacitus claim the first crack down left 600,000 Jewish dead, and the second left 850,000 dead—and all without the dread benefit of weapons of mass destruction, without gas chambers, without firing squads even. This is to say that John's gospel, which emerged around this later date, did so out of what can accurately be remembered as one of the most violent epochs in history.

Yes, the "Jews" had good reason to resent these Jewish-Christians, and the Jewish-Christians could join that interplay. Resentment, once given cause, is tough put back to rest.

But it wasn't just that. There was another reason Jewish-Christians might have wanted a clear distinction drawn between themselves and their origins—for to do so was also good marketing. As the Christian movement broadened into Gentile regions, to associate too closely with Jews was a risk. Jews were under the boot of the empire, so not a people non-Jews might eagerly join.

I just read for a second time Nell Irvin Painter's book *The History of White People,* in which this Princeton historian traces the development of whiteness as an embodied, and politicized, concept. One chapter examines how immigrant groups that we would perceive as white were received in the U.S. As it happens, Irish immigrants in the 19th century were caricatured in political cartoons in precisely the same way as African and black slaves were—with devolved facial features and primate-like postures. In sum, the Irish were considered black. Well, of course, it might have been revolutionary and for the good if these two hated groups had joined together so to upend the power structure that made life humiliating and painful for both. But, no. Instead, the Irish were quick to associate and assimilate with the white, Protestant elite—something that was possible for their (obvious to us) fair skin. And who can blame them?

Who would volunteer for suffering?

Who among us would stand in solidarity with those tormented, those tortured?

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This story is not about the Temple. This incident in the Temple between Jesus and the Temple—the priests, the sellers of animals for sacrifice, the money-changers, the animals themselves—is not about Jesus criticizing the Temple or anticipating gleefully its destruction, though it would be easy to mistake it so.

Perhaps even our gospel writer, "John," mistook it so. After all, John wrote this gospel forty, maybe fifty, years after the destruction of the Temple, which happened in 70 A.D. This is to say that it's possible "John" had no lived memory of the Temple, and that no one listening to his narrative did either. This means that those first hearers of this gospel had more in common as regards the Temple with us—we who live two millennia later—than with those who came just two generations earlier. It meant little to them but what they were told it had meant to their parents and grandparents.

However, for those who had lived and felt experiences within the Temple and about the Temple—a group of people that included Jesus, by the way—for these, this site wasn't merely sacred in some abstract, sentimental manner. No, this site was the locus of God in the world. According to one Midrashic writing, "Just as the navel is positioned in the center of a man, thus is the Land of Israel positioned in the center of the world…and the Temple is in the center of Jerusalem, and the Great Hall is in the center of the Temple, and the Ark [of the Covenant (which contained the tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments)] is in the center of the Great Hall, and the Foundation Stone is in front of the Ark, and beginning with it the world was put on its foundations." That was the Temple as Jesus knew it: it'd be crazy to imagine Jesus would delight in its downfall.

James Carroll agrees, indeed got me thinking in these terms. In his book, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews,* which recounts centuries of Christian anti-Semitism, he writes: "The assumption that Jesus came to the Temple to oppose it—to destroy it—not to worship at it or to defend it, is the first mistake [post-Temple] followers of Jesus would have made—because…they would not have known what the Jews who preceded them knew: that God had touched the earth in this place, and still did [even amidst ruins]…" Perhaps indeed God still does yet amidst ruins.

I added this last part, but I bet Carroll believes it: God still does touch that place.

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This story is not about religious practice—either Jewish religious practice or any formal religious practice. This incident that remembers Jesus to have toppled over the mechanisms for the established way of right worship isn't about Jesus rejecting faith practices in any and all forms—though it would be easy to mistake it as such.

His making a whip of cords to spur the animals for sacrifice out of the Temple is good cause to suppose he objected to blood sacrifice. Indeed I have supposed it, and do believe it, that it was time to let blood sacrifice go as a means for worship. It had served its purpose in the history of people seeing their violent urges in a more self-critical light. His setting them to flight is good cause to consider that he meant to become the final blood sacrifice, the one that undoes the whole "sacred violence" myth.

His pouring out the coins and overturning the tables are both understandable cause for supposing Jesus was a radical religious reformer, someone who'd do away with formalism in worship altogether and certainly the commerce that always attaches itself to it. Indeed, I have supposed it, but it's not that simple. Consider: the vestments at Trinity Church in Lenox, those for the altar tables, and for the priest and deacons, required cleaning and mending, which was going to cost upwards of $12,000! I heard that with disdain, and then remembered their beauty and fine craftsmanship, their long life in the parish and the way the people took care of them—with reverence and love. And I set aside my puritanical judgment. After all, my Harvard robe is showy in its own way, costly in in its own way. And, let's face it, it could probably stand a cleaning.

Finally, Jesus' "zeal for the Lord's house" which "consumed him" will be used to imply that those who also worshiped at the Temple, "the Jews," had all grown cynical about the Temple, were using it merely to enrich themselves or empower themselves. But why should one person's zeal be understood as others' complacency?

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I know a hermeneutical sermon isn't so exciting. Hermeneutics, the study of interpretation, the study of how we study: it's a few steps removed from what might make a sermon actually interesting. But I find myself mired in one every couple of years because how we read the Bible is surprisingly important.

I remember once in our Monday morning group, we were thinking about evangelism, about going public with the riches of our faith-life, and I asked people, what's the greatest stumbling block in making the Christian life appealing to those who are living in other ways, understanding and imagining life in other terms? Bob said, after some time quiet, though I think he'd long had his answer ready: he said, "The Bible."

"Oh, come now," was my first response. "It isn't that bad," I rather limply defended it. But he went on to explain—all the bizarre, confusing, even frightening stories (of war and floods, of devastation and ruination); all the bold proclamations about what's true and what's false; all the strong characters who loom large but in puzzling and easily misleading ways. Face it: it's a problem.

Protestants have always asserted that everyone can and should read this book. This was their shocking assertion from the start: that the Book belongs not only to the priesthood but also, and perhaps moreover, to the people. Everyone can and should have one in their homes; every hotel room can and should have one in the bedside drawer. (Okay, that was a later development.) Meanwhile, Catholics have implicitly stood behind the assertion that the Bible is a "dumb and difficult book," by which it's understood as not speaking itself and its intentions plainly ("dumb" meaning not stupid but silent, and difficult meaning difficult).

Well, as is obvious, I'm a Protestant, but I'm also post-modern so I suspect both are true—everyone can and should read this book, but never alone, instead always amidst a community that holds and corrects because it is indeed a dumb and difficult book (though it's also brilliant and genius). It speaks to us but not plainly, instead always through channels complicated by its long history, its old age, its original writers and eventual redactors and then compilers and translators and interpreters, and by its readers' devotion to it and so need of it and reliance on it and reverence for it. These combined pack it with power and puzzlement that no ordinary book could possibly exercise.

Protestants have tended to believe that the Bible wrote the Church: that the lived tradition grows out of scripture. "*Sola scriptura,*" we've continued to say, and increasingly sloppily so, if you ask me. Meanwhile, Catholics have tended to believe that the Church wrote the Bible: that Scripture is a record of the lived tradition, for all the blessings and flaws of it.

Well, as is obvious, I'm a Protestant, but I'm also post-modern so I suspect both are true—that the Bible wrote the Church and that the Church wrote the Bible. What's more, I suspect each is only as true as the other is also true. We are living and recording this tradition, which shapes our stories so these come to bear our wide hopes and our narrow prejudices, our deep convictions that abide and our shallow assumptions that crumble and fade.

This story of Jesus in the Temple according to John is not about Jesus taking issue with Jews or Judaism. Jesus was not the world's first Christian anti-Semite.

This story is not about Jesus disdaining the Temple, a site that, on the contrary, he would likely have revered and loved.

This story is not about Jesus hating religion for all its hypocrisy and heavy-handedness, untethering humanity from these ties that bind.

This story is about Jesus locating God within Himself. Sort of simple—simple to put if not simple conceive of: this story is about Jesus proclaiming how fully and truly God abides in him.

It's a central claim of this gospel, John, that God abides in Jesus—if not exclusively so than at least absolutely so. After all, God has been known to fill other places and other spaces: the mountain on which God gave down the law, the Tabernacle which gave people an early form for worship, and of course the Temple—both the 1st and the 2nd (and perhaps someday a 3rd) Temple. God is also known to fill time, to alight and redeem time, to transform *chronos* into *kairos*. The Sabbath is a sanctuary of God in time, as might be for us 10 o'clock on Sunday mornings and maybe even 10 o'clock on Monday mornings.

All this might be true: that God yet fills many places. This story of Jesus in the Temple according to John is also true, is perhaps truest of all: that Jesus is the full embodiment and absolute expression of the Eternal God, the Creator of all in the beginning and Redeemer of all at the end.

And this means not only that Jesus is God-like, but more crucially that God is Jesus-like.

Remember a few weeks ago? I told you about people who explain to me, somewhat defensively, that they have no problem with God, it's just Jesus they don't like or get or believe in. And this always puzzles me because, by most accounts, whereas God can be tied in with all sorts of problems, Jesus was a compellingly kind person. Yes, he had no patience for injustice; yes, he had no patience for people who abused their power and for principalities whose very structure amounted to oppression and exploitation. But it's God who so often is implicated in deeply problematic things. God is said to have flooded the world. God is said to have set Job up to lose everything in life that he loved. Then Jesus came along and begged the question, are you so sure those things were of God?

To say that Jesus is the full presence and expression of God in the world is to say that we have a standard by which to measure revelation for its truthfulness and confession for its authenticity; it's to say that we have a standard by which to evaluate our suspicion that God is in our midst. To say that Jesus is the manifestation and realization of God's intention and action in our regard is to say that we have a means by which to check and balance our hope and faith. And in Lent, the season in which we find ourselves this morning, would have us remember that Jesus was most truly Jesus during his Passion: during his Last Supper and Judas' betrayal; during his has peaceful arrest and blameless trial (he neither worthy of blame nor himself casting blame); during his condemnation and then of course his crucifixion. All this reveals the nature and action and intention of God whose hope and aim is that the world might be saved, and all therein: self-giving love for the sake of a dynamic, living peace.

People attribute all sorts of things to God; God gets saddled with all sorts of acts that may or may not be of God. Tornados, blizzards, earthquakes, volcanoes:

war, elections, Super Bowl outcomes; homophobia, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, slave-based economies. God is said to intend and to bless all sorts of abominations and trivialities. With Jesus—his life, his death, his life—we have a way by which to evaluate which claims are true and which are false. It comes down to this: love.

Thanks be to God.