

March 3, 2024
John 2:13-22

Lent 3
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Looking Through a New Lens”

“Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

When I was in Grade 2, I began to have problems seeing the blackboard in our classroom, which prompted a trip to our eye doctor. After giving me a thorough examination, the doctor informed my parents that I was nearsighted and needed glasses to see anything at a distance. This was the beginning of my need to wear glasses, which has continued through several prescriptions and pairs of eyeglasses through the years. I remember the difference that first pair of glasses made for me; suddenly everything that was blurry came into sharp focus, and words at a distance that were indistinguishable became very clear. Looking through these new lenses made a tremendous difference in my life.

Several years and many pairs of eyeglasses later, I returned to my optometrist after again experiencing problems with blurred vision. By this point I had begun to wear glasses full-time, especially for driving; but I noticed that there were times when I could not see words on paper clearly, and road signs were sometimes out of focus. After another examination, my doctor informed me that I needed “progressive lenses,” a newer version of bifocals that have areas of the lenses that are for specific forms of viewing. At first, it took some adjusting to these new lenses (walking down a flight of stairs was particularly challenging), but soon I was able to see clearly, and my eyes adjusted to finding the right place on my lens for reading either close or at a distance. Once again, looking through these new lenses made all the difference in my life.

For those of us who wear glasses, these prescription lenses are a tremendous aid in our daily lives, something that at times we take for granted. But for persons who do not have access to optometrists or eyecare, they are at a disadvantage from their inability to see clearly; it can affect their learning, ability to work, and other aspects of life in which their quality of life is compromised from their ability to see clearly. When they are able to get access to corrective lenses, they are able to see in ways that were formerly unavailable to them. Looking through a new lens opens a new world of possibilities, seeing that which had previously been obscured.

While today's Gospel lesson may seem to have little in common with our ability to see through a new lens, Jesus' incident in the Jerusalem Temple is for the purpose of opening the eyes of his people to a new reality that he has come to inaugurate. The Cleansing of the Temple is an incident in Jesus' life that is found in all four Gospels, but John is unique in where he places this episode in his account of the ministry of Jesus. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Jesus enters the Temple during Holy Week, between his entry into the Holy City on Palm Sunday and his death on the Cross on Good Friday:

- “Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, ‘Is it not written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations”? But you have made it a den of robbers.’” – Mark 11:15-17.

In the Fourth Gospel, the Evangelist places the episode at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, completing the inaugural event at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11), which revealed the grace and glory of Jesus and the abundant new life he offers (*“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”* – 2:11). Placing his visit to the Temple after the miracle at Cana highlights the challenge and threat that his teaching will pose to the existing religious order of the people of Israel.

Our Gospel lesson begins by placing this episode in the context of the celebration of a major Jewish festival: *“The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.”* (2:13). The Passover is one of the most significant celebrations for Jews, the remembrance of their liberation from slavery and their being brought through the waters of the Red Sea to Mount Sinai, where God gives Moses the Torah that begins with the statement that *“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”* (Exodus 20:2-3). In Jesus' time, the Passover was one of the major pilgrimage festivals in which Jews from throughout the Mediterranean would return to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple. Since many would have traveled great distances to celebrate this pilgrimage festival in the Holy City, they would not have been able to bring animals that were required for the burnt offerings (*“If the offering is a sacrifice of well-being, if you offer an animal of the herd, whether male or female, you shall offer one without blemish before the LORD.”* – Leviticus 3:1). Similarly, the Temple tax could not be paid in Greek or Roman coinage because of the image

and inscription on those coins (*“Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’”* – Matthew 22:20-21). Therefore, the sale of animals and the changing of money was necessary for those who came to offer sacrifices and monetary offerings to the Lord in the place where God dwelled amid God’s people. While there were inevitable abuses in the Temple system, Jesus’ actions in the Fourth Gospel are not for the purpose of confronting abuses in the Temple of the Lord, but the temple system itself. Jesus’ actions in the Temple are narrated in one long complex sentence in the Greek text, which carries a mood of urgency and haste, thereby underscoring the intensity of Jesus’ actions:

- “Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, ‘Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!’” – 2:15-16.

In a play on the word for “house” (*oikos*), Jesus complains that his Father’s “house” – the Temple – has become a “house of trade.” Since trade was necessary to maintain the Temple worship tradition of sacrifice and tithes, Jesus’ charge is a much more radical accusation in John than in the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus is not merely offended at the abuses and corruption occurring within the Temple compound; he is issuing a powerful challenge to the very authority of the Temple and its worship (*“But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.”* – 4:23).

The focus of the story shifts to the disciples, who function as interpretive witnesses: *“His disciples remembered that it is written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’”* (2:17). This quote from Psalm 69:9 serves as the lens through which the Fourth Evangelist wants the reader to interpret Jesus’ actions. The Psalm functions as a prophecy of the time when Jesus will be “consumed” at his Crucifixion. John’s use of the Psalm gives the Temple cleansing a Christological emphasis; *“John’s Temple story is ultimately about Jesus’ fate, not the Temple’s”* (Gail O’Day).

It is not surprising that the leaders of the Temple challenge Jesus for his disruptive actions: *“The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’”* (2:18). The demand for a “sign” (*semeion*) is in reality a question about Jesus’ authority (*“When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’”* – Matthew 21:23). John uses “sign” here in the sense of a warrant, not as a revelatory act; they want to know if Jesus has some

form of proof of his authority to disrupt Temple commerce, as police authorities require a warrant to search a person's home. Jesus' response is to point them to a time in the future in which the Temple will be both destroyed and rebuilt: "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*" (2:19). This response about the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple is used in the Synoptic Gospel as false testimony at Jesus' trial and in taunting Jesus on the Cross:

- "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" – Mark 14:58.
- "Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!'" – Mark 15:29-30.

The people respond to Jesus' statement about destroying and rebuilding the Temple with disdain: "*This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?*" (2:20). The building of this version of the Temple had begun @19 BC during the reign of Herod the Great; it was not uncommon for great buildings (such as European cathedrals) to be under construction for several understand only the surface meaning of Jesus' words (as Nicodemus would misunderstand Jesus' declaration that "*no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above*" (3:3). The key to both their misunderstanding and Jesus' meaning behind his statement can be found in the verb "raising" (*egeiro*), which will also be used in John to speak of resurrection ("*Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomsoever he wishes*" – 5:21). The Evangelist adds an editorial comment that "*he was speaking of the temple of his body*" (2:21). Since for Judaism the Temple is the locus of God's presence on earth, Jesus' body is not the locus of God among God's people; "*Jesus has the authority to challenge the Temple system because he is the locus of God's presence on earth.*" (O'Day). Jesus is "*the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth*" (1:14); his birth in human form is the fulfillment of God's promise of "*Emmanuel ... God is with us*" (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23). The Incarnate Word is the new dwelling of God on earth. The bodily resurrection of Jesus – the raising up of the temple of his body after his death – will be the sign that God provides the Father's confirmation and sanctioning of all that Jesus said and did.

- "According to John 1:14-18, Jesus is the embodiment of God's Word, whose dwelling with humanity enables them to see God's glory and who continues to show them the way to the Father ... For John, when people focus too much

on a physical location, they miss out on God's glory standing right in front of them." – Alicia D. Myers.

The Evangelist concludes this story by reporting that *"after he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken."* (2:22). In John, remembrance is active reflection on the past in the light of the Resurrection of Jesus and with the aid of the Holy Spirit. Such reflection leads to faith and deepened understanding (*"His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him."* – 12:16). Remembering the past with the aid of the Spirit reveals the truth of Scripture and Jesus' words in new ways. This points to *"the interpretive activity of believers as they remember and claim the stories and sayings of Jesus as their own"* (O'Day). The New Testament writers often speak of Jesus' resurrection as the key to fully understanding the Scriptures in all their depths:

- "Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'" – Luke 24:45-49.

People often interpret Jesus' actions in cleansing the Temple as an example of his "righteous anger"; but there is no indication in any of the Gospels that Jesus acts out of anger – righteous or otherwise. Jesus' actions in the Temple at the beginning of John's Gospel point us to a new way of looking at our relationship with God and how we come into the presence of the Lord. For the people of Israel, being in God's presence required an arduous pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to the "house of the Lord." For those who see in Jesus Christ the one who is the Incarnate God dwelling among them, they know that God is with us when our Lord comes to us. Jesus will later promise his disciples that *"those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."* (14:23). Knowing that God is with us in Jesus Christ means that we no longer must go to God, because God has come to us. It means that we do not have to bring offerings or exchange our funds into coinage that is acceptable to the Lord, for it is through the free gift of baptism that we are born anew to a living hope and inheritors of the blessings that God freely bestows on us, because *"if we have been united with him*

in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”
(Romans 6:5).

- “This promise of divine indwelling is fulfilled in the gift of the Holy Spirit by which God dwells in Jesus’ disciples. God’s dwelling in his disciples makes them into a temple ... God’s dwelling in Jesus’ disciples after the resurrection is a genuine, present sharing in heavenly life that is the Father’s house.” – Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV.

One of my professors in seminary, Dr. John Reumann, once described the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ as the lens through which we view both the past and the future. We look into the lens of our Saviour’s passion and triumph over death to understand how God was working through God’s people and how these events led to our Lord’s gift for us, and we look through the lens that is ours in our baptism into Christ to understand the future that is before us, a future that is clearly filled with hope because it is a future where we see God present with us. It is through the gift of our Lord’s death and resurrection that we have the promise spoken of by Paul in Acts, that God will *“open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”* (Acts 26:18).

Seeing the world through corrective lenses can open new vistas and introduce us to new realities and possibilities that were once not available to us. By placing the Temple incident at the start of Jesus’ public ministry, John provides us with a lens for viewing the whole of Jesus’ life and work. From now on, we do not have to journey to be in the Lord’s presence, nor do we have to provide offerings acceptable to God. In Christ, God has freed us from all that would separate us from the love that God freely bestows on us. In Christ, we have the assurance of God’s presence and God making God’s dwelling among us. In Christ, we can see with eyes born anew that no matter where we are, no matter how dark or dismal our circumstances may be, that our Lord is dwelling with us, and that nothing will separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord, who through the lens of faith we can see and know is with us always.

Amen.