

“Endless Maze of Guessing...” becomes the Moment of Clarity
The Third Sunday in Lent – March 7, 2021 – John 2:13-22/B

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 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!” His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 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.

I think every one of us has experienced a moment. A critical moment when you just can’t take any more. When you finally break, give in, or just can’t go on for one more day. Did you find yourself reacting in a way that you had never imagined you would, or could? And what was it that brought you to that moment? What tipped you over and made you choose? How did Alexander Hamilton recognize that he was running out of time? What happened that made a bone-weary Rosa Parks finally take an open seat on the bus? What brought Jesus of Nazareth to the surprising reaction of anger and disruption **that we are watching in today’s lesson? What caused these moments, and what happened next?**

Let’s back up just a little bit to imagine the scene: Our story might have started out as a perfectly normal day. It had been just over a week or so since Andrew and Philip had left John the Baptist at the Jordan River to follow Jesus back up to the north to Galilee, where Andrew and Philip introduced Peter and Nathanael to Jesus, and everyone met up again at a wedding in Cana. It was at the wedding that Jesus (with strong encouragement from his mother) had initiated his public ministry with a miraculous sign. He had changed large containers of water into wine, much to the delight of the steward, the bridegroom and the guests at the party, who had yet to realize that they had drunk up more wine than was planned for, and were about to experience a miracle.

After a few days rest in Capernaum, they all set out for Jerusalem. *The trip from the Galilee would have taken a minimum of four days, and likely because Mary was with them, the shorter, cooler, yet infinitely more dangerous route through Samaria was set aside, in favor of the route along the Jordan River valley.* Can you imagine the conversations on that journey? At first, they may have walked in their small group, debriefing the events at the wedding, and getting more and more excited about what had occurred at Jesus’ baptism that made John say that Jesus was the Son of God! And now, Jesus had done a miraculous sign which only seemed to confirm the thoughts that they were daring to share. As they walked, they probably joined with other groups who were also on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover festival, so by the time they got near to Jerusalem, they were probably in the midst of hundreds, perhaps thousands of people. And everyone was hearing the stories about Jesus. Word was beginning to spread. Jesus was “going viral on the internet.” The “endless maze of guessing” about how his ministry would unfold and who he might be was

gathering speed, hurtling toward one moment of righteous anger that would clarify his ministry for the next three years.

Anger. It is a universal human emotion. We all have it. We mostly try to avoid it. Because the simple part of responding to the cues of our own anger is probably the hardest part: to identify what we are angry about; what is the deeper emotion that anger is trying to hide. (Are you with me on that?) Because anger is what we call a “masking” emotion. It is not pure – in and of itself – but there is always something deeper that is brewing just underneath the surface that might be revealed if the anger was not hiding it, masking it, so to speak. And we all know how good it feels to take off our masks and take a deep, cleansing breath again! Few of us are any good at defining what those deeper emotions might be – and even if we can, we would be hard-pressed to actually reveal it to someone else.

But you can see this idea illustrated in Jesus’ anger – in the disruption of the economy that had been serving the Temple for years. Let’s try to learn from Jesus, and understand that sometimes our anger is telling us something so important that we shouldn’t ignore it... That we must say something, and maybe even do something...because anger can help clarify things. And in this moment, Jesus had clarity. He knew what was the Father’s will for all of us, and he saw that will be turned away. It wasn’t the fact of animals being sold for the convenience of those who would come to sacrifice with hearts that sought release from burdens and forgiveness of sins. It wasn’t that money was being changed so that even the coins would not honor other “gods” in heaven or on earth. These enterprises, in themselves, were not the problem. In more contemporary words, the lyrics from Jesus Christ Superstar have Jesus shouting, “My Temple should be a house of prayer. But you have made it a den of thieves...” Jesus was disappointed. Jesus’ righteousness was indignant. Jesus was deeply pained that folks would lose their focus on this one place on earth where God was accessible to humanity and received the gifts of sacrifice and prayer. Perhaps it was too much all at once. So anger covered it all over.

Most Bibles title these stories to identify them quickly. This scene is often titled the Scouring of the Temple or The Cleansing of the Temple. What turn Jesus’ stomach was that the people had gotten so carried away with “doing” Temple, they had forgotten to worship God. So Jesus, energized by his emotions...scourges, purifies, cleanses the Temple so that it might no longer be a marketplace, but a place to worship God. A place apart. A sanctuary. A Temple. No longer a convenience, or a standard for faithful conduct, but a sanctuary for the hurting. No longer a place where forgiveness can be exchanged for animals. No longer a receptacle to receive money to line the pockets of the religious hierarchy, but a place where widows, orphans and aliens could come to be cared for and supported. And how did he do it? Through anger. Through an anger that is frustrated with what is and directed towards that which stands in the way of what God would have us be.

You have heard us teach that stories that appear in all four of the Gospels need to be taken very seriously. This episode appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke, but falls in the narrative at the very END of Jesus’ ministry – immediately after the triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday – and his actions are part and parcel of the charges against him that lead to his crucifixion. But, only in John does Jesus protest in this way at the beginning of his ministry, and the unique details that John provides invite us into deeper reflection of Jesus’ anger, and our own. Because only in John does Jesus stop to make a whip of cords...

Because especially in our world today, given the year we've all had, we are all angry about something, but we have to stop and listen to our anger for it to do us or our world any good... That's a lot of misused anger if you ask me. So, as a culture - as a nation - we have to learn what to do with anger, because right now anger is tearing us apart.

And afterwards, he kicked over tables, he scattered money, he chased off livestock, and no one got hurt. No one died. And through him and the Temple that was his body we were given a new relationship with God, a new place where God dwells. In us.

We must learn from him how to confront what is beneath our anger - but it takes time to discover what is hiding, and so we stop to make a whip of cords. Or take a deep breath. Or a walk in the woods. Or a moment with a child or a companion. Or listen to music. Or read Holy Scripture. Or to talk to God about what we need to learn from our anger... For in your frustration with this world and her people, lies the motivation to make some changes. To bring forward again the Lenten theme from 2020: Take. The. Time.

Because you deserve better, and your anger, channeled, will help you get there. Do not fear your moments of anger, for they are moments of clarity. Stop and listen, for the Spirit still speaks, calling us away from the way of death that we have grown used to and towards new life.

Pastor Susan Langhauser
Advent Lutheran Church, Olathe, KS

RESOURCES: *Wikipedia.com*; Rev Joe Evans, "Braid the whip" for Day1, March 7, 2021; Steven Charleston, *Facebook*; Jeremy Serrano, *ELCA Faith Lens*, March 7; Henri Nouwen, "A Lenten Prayer"

As we pray this season of Lent, hear these words
from Henri Nouwen's *A Lenten Prayer*:

The Lenten season begins.

It is a time to be with you, Lord, in a special way,
a time to pray, to fast, and thus to follow you
on your way to Jerusalem, to Golgotha,
and to the final victory over death.

I am still so divided. I truly want to follow you,
but I also want to follow my own desires, and lend an ear
to the voices that speak about prestige, success,
pleasure, power, and influence.
Help me to become deaf to these voices
and more attentive to your voice,
which calls me to choose the narrow road to life.

I know that Lent is going to be a very hard time for me.
The choice for your way has to be made every moment of my life.
I have to choose thoughts that are your thoughts,
words that are your words, and actions that are your actions.
There are not times or places without choices.
And I know how deeply I resist choosing you.

Please, Lord, be with me at every moment and in every place.
Give me the strength and the courage to live this season faithfully,
so that, when Easter comes, I will be able to taste with joy
the new life that you have prepared for me. Amen.