Imagine four of your relatives go to the same event, say a family reunion you can't attend, and each sends you a letter afterward describing what happened there, maybe a heated argument between two people there. Cousins A, B and C all write about the argument in much the same way, giving you a chronological account of what led up the fight. They all put the incident near the end of their stories, so it seems that all the things that happened before led up to that point. Cousin D's letter, however, is a bit different, because he puts that same argument near the beginning of his letter, then follows it with many of the same stories the others include. As you put D's letter down, you stop to think. All four relatives were at the same event and saw the same things, yet D chose to structure his story differently. Why?

It's the same question we ask of the four gospel writers. All four include a version of the story of Jesus cleansing the temple. Matthew, Mark and Luke place the account near the end of their gospels, after Jesus' entry in Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. But John chooses to put the story at the beginning of his book, right after Jesus chooses his disciples and goes to a wedding in Cana. And there is a reason for that. John wants his readers to know that Jesus is bringing a radical change into the world and it starts at the very beginning of his ministry. What better place to show that change than in the worship life of the Jewish people?

In John, Jesus and his disciples went to Jerusalem for the spring festival of the Passover. It would not have been unusual to see the area around the temple full of moneychangers and people selling animals for temple sacrifices. Jewish law required that monetary offerings made at the temple be done in Jewish currency and the animals bought for sacrifice would need to be paid for in Jewish money as well. Since most of the pilgrims would have Roman coins in their money belts, someone had to be available to make the exchange. These merchants were performing a necessary service for the pilgrims, many of whom had traveled long distances to profess their faith. What angered Jesus was that this particular year, the high priest had given the moneychangers and animal sellers permission to do their business inside the temple walls and they were crowding out the worshipers and creating an atmosphere of chaos rather than worship.

Jesus rid the temple of those who were getting in the way of the primary purpose of the place – praise and thanksgiving to God. Jesus also turned the focus of the pilgrims' worship away from a distant God who needed to be appeased with sacrifices onto himself as the divine God made flesh in Jesus. No longer would God's people make animal and money sacrifices to God for God had turned the tables on that practice. God had made the ultimate sacrifice of his Son, whose death and resurrection would complete the promises God had made through all generations. This was such a big deal to John that he chose to put the account right up front in his gospel. Jesus was God's sacrifice for the sake of the world. No more moneychangers or merchants in the temple. No more doves or lambs killed on the temple altar as atonement for the people's sins. This Jesus changed everything and he meant business. He was willing to go into the holiest of holy places and destroy it all if need be in order to get people's attention and show them he was the Lamb of God come to take away the sin of the world. The people, of course, didn't understand, especially the ones in high public and religious office. They saw Jesus as a threat to the status quo and looked for a way to silence him. John sees everything that unfolds in Jesus' ministry as coming out of this radical change that happens in the temple and that is why it makes sense for him to place the account where he does. John also wants to draw attention to the dichotomy of a temple built by human hands and the temple of Jesus' body. When Jesus told the Jews that he could raise the temple up in three days if it was destroyed, the men ridiculed him. It took forty-six years to build the temple and it still wasn't finished. What did this Jesus mean saying he could rebuild it in three days? Of course, Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body. He would be completely destroyed by death and raised from the dead three days later, so that death and destruction would never be the end of God's people again.

There is an urgency to John's gospel that comes through even in the ordering of the stories that the other gospel writers include. John calls his community of Jews and non-Jews to follow the revolutionary way of Jesus. He shows that the way of Jesus is full of challenge and adventure – full of the risk that we encounter when we let go and trust. The way may be hard. But in Jesus we find grace and truth. In Jesus, we have life and have it abundantly. In Jesus, we find light shining in all the darkest places of our lives.

There is so much here that can change a life forever. In Jesus, you and I find forgiveness of all our sins, even the ones we find it hard to forgive ourselves. We hear a message to pass along to others: Jesus died and was raised for you, so that your life might have meaning and hope. We receive a challenge: What is there in us that needs to be overturned, shattered and broken before we can turn ourselves fully to God in Christ? What is there is the world, in the places where we work and live, in the church that we are willing to go to the wall for, to turn the tables over on, because what is happening is robbing people of justice or freedom? What rubble can you and I stand in the middle of and say, “God will make this whole?”

In early 2002, I attended a preaching conference in New York City. Because it was just a few months after the destruction of the World Trade Center towers and the location of the conference was near Ground Zero, the speakers all used the unavoidable reality of the tragedy in their presentations. During the sessions, we were encouraged to visit the Ground Zero site, because it would give everyone at the conference a common frame of reference. I didn't want to go. I didn't want to be just one more in a long line of tourist gawkers peering down into the destruction like drivers slowing down to look at a bad car wreck. But after being urged by yet another speaker to go because, I went. When it came my turn, I walked out onto the platform that extended above the hollowed-out crash site, much like a diving board over a pool or a pirate ship's gangplank. What I saw was a thousand times worse than I thought it would be. The hole that was being cleared was much deeper than I expected and, even though a lot of debris had already been removed, there were still countless tons of steel and concrete strewn and piled up across the site. Before I left the platform, I looked over to the right. In the small cemetery of a church adjacent to the Trade Center site, a woman was kneeling in front of a tombstone and using a paintbrush to wipe away the thick soot and ashes that still covered the entire cemetery and the surrounding buildings. At the rate the woman was working, I knew it would be weeks, if not months, before that cemetery was cleaned up.

As I think back on that day, I think of Jesus telling those men in the temple that if it were destroyed, he could build it back again in three days. I think of Jesus standing in the middle of the rubble at Ground Zero, declaring that he is the only one who can rebuild that destruction and not just the place where the concrete and steel was piled up. Only Jesus can rebuild the lives of those who lost people they loved at that site. Only Jesus can rebuild a country shaken by unthinkable violence. Only Jesus can repair the lives of people threatened by violence every single day. Only Jesus can mend the tears in our world fabric caused by racism, extremism, violence against women, crimes against children. Because he has been killed by those who mistrusted and feared him, our resurrected Jesus brings healing and peace into our shattered world, then uses us to dispense that grace to others. That's what was so important to John that he couldn't wait to say it. That's what must be so important to us that we can't wait to live it.

Amen.

*Lent 3B*

*March 8, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*John 2:13-22*

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