

The Third Sunday in Lent
March 4, 2018
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Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:13-22

My name is Simeon. Not that it matters who I am. It's just ... well, the point is I was there that day, that day the one they called Yeshua – you probably know him as Jesus ... I was there that day Jesus came into the Temple grounds and caused such a ruckus.

I hear they killed him a couple of years later. Well, you coulda seen that coming. (I said so at the time.)

The thing is ... I've heard some of the stories some folks tell about that day. And there's some truth in what they say, sure. But they miss the mark in a lot of ways. It was Passover. They got that right. And so, naturally, it was crowded. Jerusalem was always crowded, of course, but especially at Passover.

I wasn't raised in Israel. And I had a family obligations. Mind you, I've always tried to keep the Law and follow the commandment. They are my joy and my delight, "sweeter far than honey," like it says in the Psalm. And I've tried to live a good life. And I have managed to make my way to Jerusalem a few times over the years. But it's hard. I'm not trying to make excuses, but it's a long trip for me ... and not without its challenges. And it's expensive. But I've tried to get back there when I could. Anyhow, that's how it is that I happened to be there for Passover that year.

When I got there, I was amazed at some of the changes. The whole complex of buildings and courtyards had been built up a bit ... not surprising, when you think about it; they were always improving and adding on. But the biggest surprise was all the noise and chaos and stench of the outer courtyards. It used to be that the buyin' and sellin' was taken care of before you got to the Temple, least that's how I remember it.

But apparently Caiaphas – he was the high priest back then – apparently he'd had a run-in with the Sanhedrin or some other faction. (I could never keep all their squabbles straight.) Well, the long and the short of it is that he brought the whole operation inside where he could keep an eye on things ... and some say, feather his nest in the process.

It's always been a scam, you know. You need a first-rate animal for sacrifice, not a blemish on it, they say. So you're stuck from the get-go. There's no way any animal you bring over on a boat or across the desert is gonna measure up, so you've got to hope you can get a deal at the local market. But it's always been a seller's market, especially for the high holy days, so you know they're gonna gouge you. (And then you just hope they don't have an extra deal going on the side with the temple priests, 'cuz sometimes they'll take a look at the animal you bring and say it's not quite up to their standards, and then you've got to go back and try to find another one.)

So there's the animal sellers ...

And then there's the money changers. They're even worse. Nobody takes foreign currency – funny money, they call it – so you've got to deal with those guys, and they're all thieves. You need Roman coins to get a room or to buy a meal in the city, of course. But you need to use their special shekels for the temple tax and they're the only ones who sell 'em, so you're really stuck there. Anyhow, like I said, it's always been a bit of a scam.

But it seemed a lot worse to have all of this going on inside the grounds of the Temple itself. And I wasn't the only one who thought so ... a lot of others were ticked off, as well. There was the overcrowding and the noise and it was filthy and it reeked. It didn't used to be like that, but that's how it was the day I came and saw what Jesus did.

Now I've heard it said that he came running in like a madman and that he picked up a whip and started wailin' on the sellers and money changers, but it wasn't like that.

No, the way I remember it, he came in and looked around and you could tell it bothered him, just like it did me. And then he stood there for the longest time, just thinking about what to do about it.

And he took some strips of leather and he plaited them together to make a kind of a whip ... and, yeah, he drove the animals out – you know, the sheep and the cattle – but he never touched a person, though. I don't know where that story came from. No, nobody had to cower in fear or scramble for their lives. Oh, it was wild, sure enough, but nobody got hurt.

And then, he went over to the money changers and he poured out their coins from their boxes, out onto the ground. And he turned over their tables, too.

Nobody tried to stop him. Matter of fact, most of us thought it was about time somebody did something, so we all just kinda watched.

He was angry, sure, but he never went berserk, like I've heard some describe it. Why, I heard someone say he became unhinged, and started throwing furniture around and screaming at the top of his lungs and flinging money in the air.

But I was there, I tell you, and that's not what happened. He was mad, yes, but not crazy. In some ways, it was even a bit more fearsome; his anger welled up from someplace deep in him – a "holy anger" is the best way I can describe it. He was like one of them prophets of old, telling everybody that none of this was what God wanted.

And, you know, it occurred to me that he did all of this just to get noticed. And it did get him noticed, I can tell you. The authorities rushed over and demanded that he explain himself. *"What sign can you show us for doing this?"*

And he just stood there and said that he was the only sign he had to offer. *“Destroy this temple,”* he said to them.

And then he did something I’ll never forget. It stopped me cold and it still gives me chills. *“Destroy this temple,”* he said to them ...

And then he stretched his arms out wide, as if on the cross.

The thing is ... they never did notice what he was doing. All they could see was that his hands pointed, like he was pointing at the walls, and they thought he meant the buildings. And they went on about how long and how hard they worked to establish this wonderful facility and how hard it was to maintain good order.

You see, that’s where most of the stories I’ve heard really miss the mark. Jesus didn’t grow into some larger-than-life super-hero. No, in that very moment, he was a lamb for the slaughter.

I even heard someone say once he saw Jesus pick up a weapon to set things right that day, and this guy said that that was why he felt like he should do the same, set things right, force those doing wrong to clean up their act. *“The only way to stop a bad guy with a sword is with a good guy with a sword.”*

I don’t know. Maybe you can make a case for taking action to make the world a better place, I don’t know about that. But I do know you’d never to try to make that case based on what Jesus did, not if you were there that day he came into the Temple grounds and caused such a ruckus.

You see, Jesus wasn’t large and taking charge ... He wasn’t takin’ names and layin’ down the law, he was just laying down his life.

After all, it’s not like anything changed because of that little protest of his. The next day, the sellers were back with their cattle and their sheep and their doves. The next day, the money changers were seated back at their tables. And the next day, Jesus, having riled up those in control ... well, the next day, he was already well on his way to the destruction he asked for.

They killed him a couple of years later. Like I said before, you coulda seen that coming.

Still, it made an impression then. And I’ve never forgotten it since.

And you know, the odd thing is ... some say he isn’t dead all the same. They say he’s still making trouble for those in charge. Now that’s a story I’d like to hear more about someday.

Footnote:

All four gospels tell the story one way or another. My way of telling in in this sermon is a bit loose, perhaps. It follow (albeit loosely) John's version. Matthew, Mark, and Luke might tell it differently. They certainly tell it as the "final straw" in Jesus's public ministry, whereas John tells it at the beginning (setting the stage, as it were, for the inevitable conflicts that would emerge throughout Jesus' ministry).

I've preached this sermon – or one very like it – before. In 2003, we read this same gospel as our country was marching towards an invasion into Iraq. The justification for that war included the rhetoric that we were morally obliged to put down Saddam Hussein and his regime – for the wellbeing of his own oppressed people and to further the peace and stability of the region.

In that context, it was easy to imagine someone hearing today's gospel as encouragement to use force to compel those doing wrong to clean up their act. (In point of fact, I knew there were people in my congregation holding that view.) But it's a horrific abuse of the Gospel in general and of this passage in particular. At least that's my understanding.

In our context, when so-called defenders of the 2nd Amendment insist that the Constitution guarantees they have a right to bear arms ... and when many go further to insist it's a God-given right ... it's still important for us to recall the true example left to us by Jesus. The *Pax Romana* – now, as then – is no peace, and certainly not the peace of God which Jesus shows us and offers us.