



A Jealous God
Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

Today's gospel from John is rich of noise, strong smells, and color; busy pilgrims perusing the cattle stalls, bartering with the merchants, and seeking priests to complete sacrificial rituals. The Temple courtyard is packed for the upcoming festivity: there is little space to move around and much dust in the air. It is a scene describing temple life during a time of preparation. Just as the season of Lent helps Christians prepare for Easter, Jews have travelled to Jerusalem early in order to purify themselves for Passover.¹ Believers gather in this holy place, remembering God's deliverance and seeking to honor God through rituals and repentance. Yet, rather than praising those gathered, Jesus takes up a posture of resistance.

His actions are premeditated and deliberate. He acts swiftly and unexpectedly, disrupting the profane and abusive business that has overwhelmed the sacred space of the temple. The cattle and the sheep flee, coins are tossed to the floor, tables crash, people trip over one another as they try to get out of the way of this unseemly coherent person. Jesus' protest command is heard above the noise: Stop.²

Why on earth would Jesus stop purification and why in such a dramatic way?

Jesus is upset that such a sacred institution has been turned into a marketplace. Like Old Testament prophets, he challenges the temple economy, questioning whether it is focused more on wealth than supplying the necessary goods for prayer.

His disciples try to make sense of Jesus' behavior by recalling the words of Ps. 69. The Jews also try to make sense of his strong but apparently meaningless reaction and skeptically wonder who gave him the authority to do what he did. How can he justify what he did? Does he have a sign from God that can vouch for what they have just witnessed? Who is he to go counter the prescriptions of the law? In their understanding, Jesus is not being biblical, and he better have an acceptable explanation for the infuriating provocation.

Jesus does have an explanation and through it, he challenges them: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." Those words don't make sense to them now and will later be used to find an excuse to condemn Jesus with crimes punishable by death on the cross. John immediately explains: "But he was speaking of the temple of his body." Jesus is the new and permanent Temple and the sanctuary of God's presence. The perfect sacrifice to God can be offered only in him. In this new Temple all people find a place to give glory to God.

Jesus, the embodiment of God's Word, speaks an *angry* word. We are not used to hear Jesus use this kind of language, this tone, this attitude. We like the more comforting and subdued images of the non-judgmental barrier-breaker prophet who is not ashamed of engaging a Samaritan

¹ John 11:55

² Kerry Hasler-Brooks is assistant professor of English at Messiah University in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania.



A Jealous God
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woman in conversation as she comes to draw water at the well, or the gentle shepherd who knows his sheep and leads them to green pastures, or the foot-washing leader who picks up a pitcher of water and a basin to wash his disciples' feet; all images which will come much later in John's gospel. Here, at the beginning of the gospel, John wants to make sure we get the record straight: the purpose of the Word incarnate is to bring humanity closer to God by revealing the truth and uncovering the lies that dehumanize us.³

It is important to notice that this passage follows Jesus' first miracle during a wedding at Cana, where he transformed water into wine demonstrating God's extravagant hospitality and generosity. There is abundance of grace in the presence of God.

One cannot step outside the divine field of influence since God is everywhere. However, one may get so distracted and so confused to seek and content oneself with substitutes for God and feel-good idols which will never be able, by their very nature, to satisfy the human heart. It is impossible to find meaningful life outside of God and the human spirit withers when it is not fed the daily divine diet of the presence of God. The human heart has a fundamental hunger for the life-giving connection with God, which needs to be satisfied and nurtured lest one experiences spiritual starvation and despair.

Because God cares, God is also jealous and wants to protect us from the allurements of idols which can distract and confuse us. God wants us to have life in abundance and that kind of life can be obtained only in the presence of God. God is Life⁴ and anything outside of God is not life. God is protective of us and goes through any length to give us life.

In gifting the Promise-Land-bound Israelites with the two Tables of the Law on Mount Sinai, God speaks words of self-identification and relationship. The One speaking is the "LORD *your* God," a saving LORD "who brought *you* out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." These people do not travel alone; they are claimed. The Commandments are given to them as a redeemed community. They have been saved together and not individually. Following God's saving act, the Commandments are given for the sake of building and protecting the community. They paint a picture of how the redeemed community acts. There are no other gods in charge; there is no bowing to idols; there is no harming the neighbor.

In this community, the name of the LORD will be honored, there will be work and rest in turn; life and faithfulness will be valued. In this community obedience to the commands represents a spiritual response of gratitude to God's salvific action. It is a response that reveals the level of

³ John 1:14; 8:31-32; 16:1-11;

⁴ John 5:26; 6:63; see also Colossians 3:4 and Psalm 36:9



A Jealous God
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relationship between the people and God and among the people themselves. God would have it no other way. Anything other than this leads to death and generates the wrath of the God of Life. The prophets have been consistent in testifying that the Day of the LORD will come swiftly. Jesus' anger ushers that day in and the kingdom of God commences.

But what are the pilgrims to do with Jesus' anger? They have come to the Temple some with open hearts and some with broken spirits. They want to fulfil the requirements of the law and offer sacrifices for purification, and yet they get pushed out of the courtyard. They want to worship the saving LORD and find some peace, and instead they experience chaos and anger. They want words of edification and comfort but are confronted with harassment and words of condemnation. No doubt many must have thought: "What's wrong with him? Is he mad? What's all this nonsense? Where are the guards when you need them?"

What do we make of Jesus' protest? Can't he find kinder words and more respectful ways to register his dissent? Can't he see that he is disrupting people's worship life? Moreover, why is he infringing on people's business? People are trying to make a living, for heaven's sake! What's all the fuss about the Temple economy? Merchants and money changers are allowed to charge for their labor and service, are they not? Is he opposed to the secularization of the Temple or is he more focused on the exploitation of people's piety? Does he want to hint at his body as the new Temple of God's kingdom or is he more concerned about the vendors overcharging and abusing the pilgrims? His actions are evidence of the in-breaking of the righteous kingdom as announced by the prophets.

Is Jesus' violence justified? Professor Amy Lavine suggests that "[t]here are times...[when] business as usual is not only inappropriate, it is obscene. Something has to be done. If we do not become angry when we see images of suffering children, if we do not feel some sort of rage when preventable tragedies occur, if we do not feel compelled to act, then something has gone terribly wrong, with us."

Jesus warns us against being angry at another person. In fact, he says in the sermon on the Mount that "If you are angry with a brother or a sister you will be liable to judgment."⁵ Yet, here at the Temple, Jesus is scary angry. Levine explains, however, that "the anger he forbids is anger against another person. But he does not forbid anger against systemic evils: hypocrisy, exploitation, harassment, molestation, drug pushing, and so on. Such forms of injustice should make us angry, and that anger should lead to constructive action."⁶

⁵ Matthew 5:22

⁶ Amy Levine, *Entering the Passion of Jesus, A beginner's guide to Holy Week*, p. 51



A Jealous God
Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22
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How is our anger meter these days? I know, we don't want to come to church and be stirred to anger: that is unpleasant. We want church to be rather a place where we calm down from all we see and hear in the world. I am certainly not asking you to hate and fight someone today. I am asking to consider what Jesus did with new eyes and not with shame, guilt, and even self-deprecation when we think we are part of the problem or self-deception when we tend to justify ourselves. Can we ignore the injustices we see? Do we feel sorrow? Compassion? Fear? Do we look for someone to blame?

I wonder how we choose to handle hot topics. Do we try our best at avoiding them? I wonder if our default is to choose peace at any cost, which is mostly translated as peace for us at the cost of those who are being abused and are suffering. What do we choose to do when we see and hear the evil around us? Are we ready to speak? To act?

Following the emergence of the coronavirus we have registered an increase in violence directed toward Asian Americans. In the Statement on anti-Asian Racism just issued this past Thursday,⁷ our Church decries the “assaults with racial slurs, bullying, spitting, physical injury, and even death” children and adults of Asian descent are facing.⁸

Racism is a sin; there is no other way around it. And it is a present, persisting, and all-pervading sin. The sooner we acknowledge and lament that, the sooner we are empowered to do something about it. But it seems hard for our society to do that? Why is it? What kind of shame is behind all this? What kind of fear? How can we be the inclusive and hospitable new Temple in Jesus where all nations come for worship in peace and safety if we do not deal with what diminishes life?

Lack of justice, abuse of power, lies, corruption, hatred, environmental degradation, and murder certainly give one pause and speak of choices woefully made outside of the influence of God. Our God is a jealous God who does not want to let go of us to forces that dehumanize us. There is a place in the new Temple for all those who embrace truth and justice. Let us borrow the holy anger of Jesus, renew our baptismal commitment to defy the forces of evil that oppose God, and follow the Commandments of God for building and preserving community. Amen.

⁷ [Statement on anti-Asian Racism - ELCA](#)

⁸ <https://abcnews.go.com/US/talk-bias-faced-reporting-coronavirus-related-hate-reporters/story?id=71238102>