

“What is the sign?”

Exodus 20:1-20; John 2: 13-22

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On this third Sunday of Lent we are looking for signs of the risen Christ. We are looking for signs that point us in the right direction. Is there any cleansing that needs to happen so we can see the signs?

We are always looking for signs to help us navigate the right way, aren't we? I know I am, especially when I am heading into unfamiliar territory ... I was given directions the other day to help me find someone's house and along with those directions there were signs to watch for to keep me on course. The directions were pretty clear, but I missed reading one of those signs accurately because I felt rushed when a big truck came barreling up behind me, trying to rush ahead into one of the lanes the road was splitting into ... so I turned the wrong way because I was in the wrong lane and I went in the wrong direction and had to back track. Now that was a minor detour, but sometimes if we miss the signs, or don't know how to read them we can go way off track and then we need help to get back on.

Somewhere around 1300 years before Jesus began to show signs Moses showed the Pharaoh signs – the ten plagues - in order to convince Pharaoh that God was serious when he said, “Let my people go” – release them from slavery so they can worship the LORD, their God. The last sign Pharaoh was given was the one that convinced him to let the Israelites go. For it, the LORD passed through Egypt and every first born in Egypt died, excepting the Israelites who were told to slaughter a lamb and put the blood of the lamb on their doorpost and lintel, so that the LORD would pass over that house - this last sign was to be remembered and celebrated from then on – it is the Passover.

God continued to give the Israelites signs as they travelled toward the promised land, as well as instructions to help them live fully as children of the Most High. He gave them the Ten Commandments – guidelines to direct their relationship with God and with people. The intention has always been that God's people were blessed to be a blessing, but through the centuries it became clear that people needed another intervention to keep them on track. They needed Jesus ... one who would not only help them understand the Ten Commandments , ... but one who would also rescue them.

“[and] God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.(John 3:16-17)

The Gospel of John records many signs which point us to that Saviour. It is divided into two books: first comes the Book of Signs (signs that show people that Jesus is the Son of God) and second, the Book of Glory (things that demonstrate the glory of Jesus Kingship as Saviour – his death, resurrection and ascension).

It is quite different from Matthew, Mark and Luke, what we call the synoptic (which means *seeing all together*) gospels, because they include many of the same stories, often in a similar sequence and in similar wording. They stand in contrast to John, which offers a unique perspective, one meant to open up the story of Jesus, the incarnate Word, to give the readers signs so that they can discover and experience the presence of God in Jesus for themselves, ...so that they may believe *in* Jesus. I was once told that if someone wishes to get to know Jesus they should read the Gospel of John first, ... and then the others – each has its own compliment to add to the whole picture.

One of those unique perspectives in the Gospel of John is the story of the cleansing of the temple (2:13-22). This story is recorded in all four gospels, but in Matthew, Mark and Luke it comes at the end of Jesus' ministry and seemingly compounds the rationale for Jesus' crucifixion. In the Gospel of John the story is right at the beginning, in the Book of Signs, so it has a different purpose. So what is the sign? And how will it give us direction?

In chapter 1, Jesus is introduced as the Word become flesh who brought things into being - Life – the Light in the darkness. John writes, "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."(verses 16-18)

Prior to the event in our reading Jesus had been baptized by John and identified as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29); he had called his disciples, and they had witnessed the first sign at the wedding in Cana when Jesus mother asked him to solve a problem and Jesus turned water into wine; his disciples believed in him. Jesus then spent a few days in Capernaum with his family and his disciples.

Now we watch as Jesus goes *up* to Jerusalem for the Passover – the celebration of the Jews commemorating their freedom from the slavery of Egypt. Jesus literally goes up because Jerusalem is on a mountain, and Jerusalem is the holy city, so there is a figurative sense of going up into the presence of God.

There is a lot involved in going to the Temple for the Passover it is a major event! There were sacrifices to offer and Temple taxes to pay. That's why we find the cattle, sheep and doves in the Temple, as well as the changers of money. There were very practical reasons for them being there. People coming from afar could bring their own animals. Only first-rate, unblemished animals were acceptable for sacrifice, and it would be difficult to maintain an animal in perfect condition even on a journey from nearby. And the money exchange was necessary because only a certain type of coin was to be used for temple taxes because of their exceptional quality(coins from the Phoenician city Tyre), and people came from a variety of nations, so really, these vendors were doing them all a favour... weren't they?

Jesus walks into the temple, looks around, ... with over a hundred thousand pilgrims in the city to make their sacrifices at the temple, it seems likely that there would probably be hundreds of sheep and cattle—not to mention the doves the poorer people would sacrifice - the noise and smell would be overwhelming ... he sees the money changersprofiting ... and it doesn't look anything like what the LORD called for in the Ten Commandments, or what Jesus summarized them as, "Love the Lord your God, Love your neighbour as yourself".

... and then we see a side of Jesus we do not often talk about...

“Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them all out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.”(vs 15)

Now the whip of cords would not likely hurt the animals, and perhaps just flicking the whip without touching them would get them running out, and this text does not appear to suggest he hit anything else, but it would certainly shock people, especially the vendors. There was absolute chaos - Can you imagine the scrambling of the money changers trying to grab back what is theirs?

“Take these things out of here!” shouts Jesus.

“Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”(vs.16)

In the other gospels Jesus accuses the vendors of making his Father’s house a den of thieves, but in the Gospel of John he says a marketplace. It seems that it is their location rather than what they are doing that is most offensive - it is still offensive that they profit from another’s sacrifice to God, but what is worse than that is that they have moved the marketplace into the temple area.

We don’t often, if ever, think of Jesus acting in this way, but this also is a sign. These actions point to the truth that Jesus is the Son of God – a sign the disciples will recall, ... that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” This dialogue can be interpreted on two levels, a technique this gospel writer frequently uses. This zeal fuels his actions in cleansing the temple, but it also consumes him on the cross.

Now when “The Jews”, referring here to the temple leaders, not to the whole nation, fail to notice that Jesus refers to himself as the Son of God, they ask him... “What sign can you show for doing this? In other words what authority does he claim to have?

Notice that no one tried to stop Jesus – why is that?

It seems they are not opposed to Jesus actions - they do not agree with what the temple court has come to be – there appears to be a political battle going on within the temple hierarchy. So if he could give them a sign, a miracle to show he is a prophet, maybe a sign like Moses gave to Pharaoh, then they could happily support his actions.

Jesus gives a sign as requested, but they don’t understand. Tear down a building of that stature and raise it again in three days – that is ridiculous – it has been under construction for 46 years they say. They think he is talking about the Temple building – the ‘official’ dwelling place of the LORD, the place Jesus just called his Father’s house, But now Jesus has shifted the meaning to reveal another sign that he is the Son of God. He is speaking of his own body – the temple of God – God incarnate. Jesus is the temple of God now. He will destroy himself - laying down his life for the sins of the world and he will be raised up in 3 days. Jesus is the sign. But they will not understand, nor will the disciples, until after Jesus death and resurrection.

The cleansing of the Temple gives another sign – none of those sacrifices will be needed in the future – Jesus comes to the Passover as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the

world. He drives out the animals and the commerce – and in its place – Grace – he will pay the price once and for all.

What is the sign we are looking for? Living on the other side of the resurrection, do we understand the signs that John is intent on telling us? John's concern is not in presenting events as they happen historically, as the other gospels do. This Gospel writer wants to prove Jesus is the Son of God through signs so that we may believe *in* him.

And believing in Jesus, we become the Temple of God and a sign to others of the love of God.

Does Jesus need to do some clearing out for us – are we influenced by a “marketplace mentality” in the temple of God?

Let us watch for the sign of where God is doing a new thing and join God in his mission.

All glory be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Focus Quote: “In the last analysis we know very little about our real needs, about what we lack and what we need.... and instead of praying for freedom we pray for a Persian rug for our cell.”
Helmut Thielicke

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