

FOUR GLIMPSES INTO THE LIFE OF JESUS

3. "Identity: Who Is this Man?"

John 2:13-22

Third Sunday in Lent, March 8, 2015

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Today, we continue the Lenten sermon series on "Glimpses into the Life of Jesus." I have suggested that Lent is a time to slow down and to do something spiritual. If you are not doing a daily devotional or praying every day I would suggest you might start.

It is also a time to take a closer look at Jesus. Who is Jesus and what does he mean for you? We have already looked at the baptism of Jesus and asked, "How was Jesus' baptism like my baptism? Last week we looked at Jesus' purpose and he said, "the Son of Man must suffer, be rejected by the authorities, die and after three days rise again." Have you ever suffered? How was your suffering like Jesus' suffering? Those stories and the one in today's NT lesson are stories that we know, that we have knowledge about, but do we experience Jesus in these stories? Can we get beyond what we know and begin to touch the life of Jesus and how it relates to our daily lives? That is my question to you this Lent, "How can we experience Jesus?"

In today's lesson Jesus is mad. Really mad. What is Jesus so mad about? Who is this man? I thought Jesus was the babe of Bethlehem who grows up to love everyone. Where does this anger come from?

He had just spent some time with his family, did that make him mad? First we find him at a wedding in Cana where his mother asked him to do her a favor and turn some water into wine. Then after the wedding he goes home with his mother, brothers and disciples for a few days. Was there a family argument?

There is nothing in those short verses to prepare us for what is going to happen next. "The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem." One author asks, "Is Jesus suffering rejection from his family, or maybe a sense that his calling is separating him from them? Could this be more like Jesus coming to take up his identity as the son of his father, as well as that of his mother and his family?"

John might even be reminding us here of Luke's story of Jesus at age 12 in the temple astonishing the religious leaders with his knowledge. This may be his first time back since then and he has a sense that this really is his house, his place. You know how it is when you go back to a former church ... the Sunday School rooms and youth area are not how you remembered them, all the rooms are much smaller. The sanctuary where you had worshipped doesn't have the same feel to it. Maybe that is what Jesus is feeling as he goes to the temple after a long absence. He expects to find a place of meditation, a place where one could pray and feel the presence of God. Instead all he finds are cattle, sheep, doves, loud talking and bickering over the price of items to be sacrificed. What a mess it must have seemed to him.

Jesus goes up to the temple, the most sacred area in all of Jerusalem, he goes to the temple to worship and find peace and what he finds is ... an open bazaar, an open market, a shoppers delight, a travelers trove of necessities and souvenirs for the trip back home. Passover time was the biggest Jewish Festival of the year. It was when they celebrated their freedom from Egypt under Moses. The marketplace on Temple Mount was a service to the religious pilgrim providing what was needed to make a fitting sacrifice. A blood offering (cattle for those who could afford it, sheep for the middle class, turtledoves for the poor) greater sins to lesser sins, greater wealth to very poor but it was all right there. Sure, it was a little more expensive but you paid for the convenience.

See him standing there, white hot fury, whip in hand, kicking over their tables, squawking birds set loose, slinging their coins. "Get this stuff out of here," he screams. "You shall not make my Father's house a house of trade."

It was the maddest, angriest anyone had ever seen Jesus, before or since. Have you ever been angry? Now, be honest! Anger is one of our basic emotions. No one had to train us to show anger or to feel anger. It has always been right there ready for action. Someone does something that offends you or that you don't like and you are ready to explode all over them. As one pundit put it, "never go to bed angry, stay up and fight." Aristotle wrote, "Anyone can become angry that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose and in the right way—that is not within everybody's power and is not easy." Anger is one of the experiences we can share with Jesus. It is most on display here at the temple. But do you think Jesus was angry with Peter when Peter took Jesus aside and told him to stop talking about suffering and rejection and death. When Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan" do you think there was a little anger there, a little emotion. Or, when his good friends James and John asked him if they could have the prize seats at his left and right on the throne when he came into his kingdom, do you think he got angry when he said to them, "You don't know what you are asking, are you able to drink from the cup that I am drinking?" Maybe he said that passively but I don't think so. Maybe he was thinking, who do you think you are asking me that question?

Not only is Jesus mad, but he is in the temple mad. He is at Passover mad! This scene occurs in the temple, during Passover. The irony is the temple, the place where the nation gathers to be close to God, and comes to meet God. And Passover time when everyone is happy to be here and quite happy to be in the temple close to God. It's quite a contrast to an angry Jesus, whip in hand, kicking over tables shouting, "Get out of here!"

Jesus got angry in the temple. I hate to ask the next question? I don't even want to suggest the next question. Have you ever gotten mad in church? Yes, I know that you probably have. Getting angry is generally over something we have deep feelings about (just ask Jesus) and I know that church people have deep feelings about what happens at church or in the church building or with the church people. I haven't seen anyone kick over a table at church but someone did attach a list of 95 disagreements to my door one Reformation Sunday.

The temple is a place where one goes to meet God, and Passover is a time to celebrate what God has done for us. Jesus expects to find a respectful attitude, instead he found merchants plying their trade.

The merchants didn't understand why Jesus got so mad. They were providing a service for people coming there to meet God. They needed to make a sacrifice. So why was Jesus so angry? Roman coins with the image of the Emperor, the only kind used in Jerusalem, could not be used to pay the temple tax because of the emperor's image. One needed shekels. So, every time you went to temple, if you wanted to offer your money, you had to deal with moneychangers. If you wanted to offer God an unspotted ox or sheep, or turtledove, as Scripture required, (unspotted being the key word) then you had to buy one from a temple merchant.

And it just made Jesus angry. It just made him mad.

I think John chose to tell this story, this angry, confrontational, disturbing story right up front, at the first, because he wanted us to know, right up front, the sort of God who had come among us. If anybody thought that our salvation was coming in the form of a nice young man from rural Galilee, come to turn the water into wine at a wedding, invite a few fisher folk to join his prayer group, say things like, "Come unto me, all you who are heavy laden and I will give you rest." John shows Jesus pounding at the door, brandishing a knotted whip, overturning tables, driving unleashed oxen down the carpeted aisles of First Presbyterian Church.

That's Jesus. Our petty, polite domestication of his good news, our pretty little cause-effect religion just makes him mad. It is to him, a violation of the holiness of God.

We do not stand, in Lent, before the mirror of our own moral navel gazing. That would be an easy thing. We stand before a righteous, demanding, accusing God. His standards are not our own. His demands intrude upon our easy complacency, overturning tables, setting wild birds loose, clanging coins on stone floors. His presence is a sting of the whip upon the neck. He barges in here and drives us out of our burrows of religious seclusion.

They knew one day the Lord's anointed would show up ... suddenly appear in the temple to straighten things out. So no one asked why when Jesus upset the tables and caused holy havoc. They were smart enough, knew enough Torah not to ask WHY? They asked for evidence ... evidence that he was the one with the authority to do this? Remember these people thought they were doing what God wanted. They were not trying to violate God's purpose.

Jesus had a strange reply: "You, destroy this temple, and in three days, I'll raise it up. Jesus speaks and his words are misunderstood—it is a pattern in John's gospel. Jesus speaks, he is misunderstood and then clarity follows. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." He is declaring his identity.

"Three days! It has taken us forty-six years to build this Church!" they said.

Will Willimon writes, "Later, much later, after we had dragged him from the temple, stripped him, beat him, hung him on a cross to die; three days later, when he barged forth from the tomb, kicked down the doors of death and was raised, passed over to victory, we remembered what he said to us that day in the temple. We asked him for a sign of what real religion was all about. The only sign he gave us was that of his death and resurrection; the only temple he left us to draw us near to God, was that built of his own Body and Blood, a new Passover in which the God who comes to us is in the form of his own bloodied Son." Do you get his identity yet?

Then. . .we remembered that day of disruption in the temple; then we knew, we believed: This Jesus is about something big!

Trying to experience Jesus beyond his words, beyond his actions, to experience Jesus is a lifelong experience. It affirms who we are ... warm and wonderful children of God.

Let me suggest that for part of your Lenten journey you go home and write down the times in your life when you were angry. What did that feel like? What were the barriers in getting over the angry emotions? See how many things in your experience with anger you have in common with Jesus' anger. Let us experience Jesus anew in our lives—not just knowledge of Jesus—but how you experience Jesus in your daily life.