

“Freedom is the Key”

John 2:13-22

A Sermon by Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant (3/4/18)

Growing up, in Sunday School, when it came to the story of Jesus clearing out the temple, a phrase I heard often was “righteous anger”. Many Christians look to this story as proof that God gets angry with us. And some have interpreted it to be evidence of God’s stance on consumerism and the Church. But my take finds a different lens through which to look. By examining all four accounts of this event in the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, there is little doubt that this event carries significance for Christians. The question then becomes, “What is its significance? Why is it important?”

Our Wednesday Bible Study group is just now diving into the Gospel of Mark. We’ve laid out an approach to studying the scriptures, which includes taking a **Panoramic** view: studying the context and historical landscape of the scripture itself; taking a **Telescopic** view: studying the scriptural passage as a self-contained prose within a larger body of literature; and finally, a **Microscopic** view: Digging into the linguistic breakdown of the words and sentence structure when it makes sense to do so, semantics and syntax, to discover greater truths.

If I were to dissect this passage using this three tier approach, I’d say the **Panoramic** view would show the event taking place in about 30-33 AD. This was likely Jesus’ final Passover week, just days before he was crucified as the other 3 Gospel accounts support. We also see this moment was bookended by Jesus teaching mostly the poor and healing the sick, which infuriated the religious leaders. A **Telescopic** view would say the story is clear within all four versions in that Jesus was truly angry and chased the sellers away, and that he juxtaposed the purpose of the Temple as a place for prayer with a corrupt system in which worshippers were taken advantage of. And through a **Microscopic** review of the passages, we discover key words that would indicate clues of a richer subtext. In order, to reach this meaning we must look at the parallel passage in Mark’s account of the same story. Mark 11:17, Jesus told them, “Is it not written ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it a ‘den of thieves’.” In the Greek, “all nations” is “*pas ho ethnos*”, all ethnicities. Jesus was quoting the Hebrew scripture though, right? The originally quoted passage is from Isaiah 56:7; it says “all nations” as “*kol am*” in the Hebrew, meaning all people groups, all cultures, all languages, and yes even all religions. From the passage we can also conclude this took place in the Court of the Gentiles, where anyone can enter. Any race. And some scholars, including myself, conclude that Jesus observed something that day that moved him to action, something that connected back to this promise in Isaiah. Jesus could no longer sit on the sideline. An injustice too great, an event requiring intervention must have occurred, one which put this promise from God in jeopardy. So, in order to paint a clearer picture of what might have happened to precipitate this incident, I have written a fictional story, which I hope will illustrate the depth and power of Jesus’ attempt at social justice that day in the Temple, his attempt to restore God’s promise in Isaiah. So I begin...

Mathias was a small statured man, whose years of working as a builder with rocks had made him both lean and strong, but mostly lean. His skin was sun wrinkled dry and hued a dark brown, all results of his 30 years in the trade. His dark features accentuated the whites of his eyes, which were often bloodshot from working in the sun. But on his one day off, which of course was the Sabbath, people would say they could see Mathias a mile away if he ventured out of his small hovel of a home to visit with his neighbors

nearby, because of his large eyes, the whites of which were then and only then noteworthy. Mathias was considered a successful man, not because of the money he had accumulated, which he had not, but because of his eight children who he loved dearly. They ranged from two years old to 12. He was a widow though, which burdened his oldest children to care for his youngest. Even in their hardship, they somehow found hope in God. Mathias regularly attended the synagogue nearby, on the outskirts of the Ethiopian town of Litspa. He was not a literate man, but when he heard the scriptures read by the rabbi, he consumed them like a voracious reader devouring every written word and he did so by listening hungrily with Jewish religious piety, often repeating them under his breath until he'd committed the sacred words to memory and then dutifully relaying the message to his own children, often over a bowl of lentils and bread. The children, like their father, listened intently.

It was this commitment to his Jewish faith that prompted Mathias to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover this year. He had never done it before, for which he felt enormously guilty. He knew he needed to, and had spent the last five years putting together a plan to fulfill his lifelong dream. He had grown up poor and his circumstances even as an adult had not substantially changed. However, with the dedication of a pious believer, Mathias had sold his only family heirloom, a wood table built by his father and passed on to him. His father had been a carpenter for a time before he became sick and died. This table had been the last item he'd constructed with his own hands and left for his family. Mathias had inherited it, serving as a daily reminder of his parents who had long passed and also of his wife who had graciously prepared so many meals and served them kindly on this familial bench. Mathias didn't want to sell it at first. His oldest daughter Sarah had proposed she and her older brother Simeon hoe the fields of a nearby farm in order to gather the extra money needed. Mathias reluctantly agreed. Simeon and Sarah, at then 11 and 10 years old worked a full year in hopes to gather enough money to cover the animal sacrifice and temple tax, as well as travel expenses to Jerusalem and back. Their work was daunting, dirty, and ultimately exhausting. The field owner was demanding. So, Sarah and Simeon often enlisted the help of their younger brothers and sisters to accomplish the job. There were not enough tools to go around, and the younger ones weeded the soil with their bare hands. Toiling with the dry earth can be a painful task for a grown adult, and even more piercing for the hands of a child, and this was no exception for Mathias' precious offspring. Their daily routine included leaving home at dawn and returning back after dark, clothes soiled, hands bloodied. The work was enormous, but the prize worth every moment of pain as Sarah would faithfully remind her family. Mathias was proud, and humbled at their fervor for accomplishing this once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage, together as a family.

Mathias had only been to Jerusalem once, as a child, but it wasn't during Passover. However, the children would prod at their father to share stories of the holy city. He described what he'd witnessed as a child, the hustle and bustle of a large city: the crowds, the languages, the priests, the looming Temple structure at the city's center. He talked of the market with goods from as far as Asia and Europa. The children were awe struck at the thought they would soon be there themselves to witness these things first hand. These stories gave them the additional motivation they needed to return to the fields and break down the dirt clods and wrestle out the prickly briar strands. Their day of holy worship in Jerusalem was soon upon them.

As Passover approached, Mathias knew they had not collected enough money for the trip. He didn't want his children's sacrifice to be in vain, so he did the one thing he never thought he could. He sold the only thing of worth that he had: his precious family table. He found a neighbor who had always appreciated its craftsmanship and offered to sell it to them. A deal was struck and the table removed. The children

were heartbroken at first but Mathias reminded them that the “things” in this life are not as important as simply having each other. He told them, “I’d give up this table in a heartbeat to have your mother back. Giving it up to go to Jerusalem to worship our God is the least we can do instead.” They understood. Mathias and his children had given up everything to accomplish this special pilgrimage, now doing this in honor of their dear mother. They scraped together everything they had, but he still wasn't completely sure it would be enough. He hoped it would be though.

As they packed their meager belongings for the three month journey, Mathias worked out the details of the trip with Yussif the caravan leader. The family would be traveling with a group of pilgrims from their small village. Mathias didn't have enough money to take advantage of one of the several tents Yussif offered to his paying travelers. Therefore, Mathias and his children would sleep under God's tent; the stars would be their blanket for the next few months. And given the level of sacrifice paid already, Mathias and his family were not discouraged in the least. They would still be able to worship in Jerusalem, and that's all that mattered.

Now months later, Yeshua and his friends were near Jerusalem, preparing for Passover too. They were briefly in Jericho, where Yeshua had been teaching. Most importantly though, he was healing people. He had healed a blind man there, Bartimaeus, who requested of him, “Rabbi, I want to see.” And Yeshua, like with so many throughout the region previously, he graciously healed him. Tikkun olam. He was fixing the broken. He was restoring not only the man's vision, but the man's means for survival. He could now gain employment and work perhaps for the first time in his life. The people knew this compassion of Yeshua, mainly the poor, the disenfranchised, the oppressed. Now it was Sunday, and they eagerly greeted him like a king as he entered Jerusalem with his companions, as they passed through the Eastern gate. “The champion of the poor and disabled is here! Our king. We are saved,” so the people thought and cheered.

As he had done in the previous years, Yeshua taught within the courts of the Temple. He had been speaking all morning, telling of a better way, a purer way to approach God by loving each other whole heartedly. The people were astonished and moved by his words. The religious leaders were angry as usual. “He's stealing our members,” they murmured among themselves. Yeshua ignored them. He focused on the people instead. He saw their hunger for God, for peace, for love, for justice. They wanted a different life. They wanted a better one. Yeshua gave them hope. As Yeshua continued to teach, new people—pilgrims making their way to the Temple from all over the Mediterranean passed by and stood in line to purchase animals for sacrifice as well as Temple coins in order to pay the Temple tax. Smoke from the burning flesh of animals filled the courtyard as Yeshua taught. Yeshua had sat at this same spot teaching in years past. He had always noticed the travelers as they entered. He had seen the poorest of people scrape together everything they had to win God's favor through this worship ritual, while priests and rabbis fattened themselves from the exchange.

For some reason Yeshua noticed a small statured man standing in line with what seemed like a hundred children around him, all dirty from long travel, wearing nothing but rags. Each child seemed malnourished and sun worn, but happy to worship on the Temple mount. As Mathias negotiated the purchase of two doves from the seller, Yeshua listened in, noting their uniquely African dialect. He heard the seller raise the price seeing how happy the children were to be there, taking advantage of their eagerness. Mathias looked crushed when he pulled out the only coins he had left, and it wasn't enough. It reminded Yeshua of the time he'd seen the widow giving everything she had as a tithe while rich

patrons gave only a fraction of their wealth. Such disparity existed between those who had means and those who did not. The two youngest of the children started to cry as the man told them they could not make a sacrifice because they did not have enough money. After paying Yussuf for the travel accommodations, Mathias had very little money left. He looked defeated as he stood there; the children's spirits broken as if they were at their rope's end, and all hope lost.

Yeshua had seen enough. This selling of God's favor was completely opposite to what God's love was all about. God desired sacrifice of heart, not sacrifice of ritual, or as the prophet Hosea had said of God, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Consumed in the moment, though, Yeshua stood up, and grabbing a rope tethered to a nearby post, he wildly whipped it around and yelled, "Stop it! Stop it! Stop forcing the poor to line your pockets. You're taking advantage of them over and over and over. God's love is NOT for sale!" Yeshua grabbed the coin table and flipped it over. The people were startled. Even his disciples didn't remember ever seeing him this upset. The animals scampered away to avoid him as he swiftly moved through the crowd. He said it with such authority and passion, the sellers left immediately. Mathias stood there with his children surrounding him, paralyzed. Sarah and Simeon kept the children safely corralled around their father. Yeshua came nearer, leaned towards Mathias' ear and whispered, "They had turned my Father's house into a den of thieves. I'm sorry." And then Jesus handed the man the only two animals that remained, the same two doves Mathias had tried to purchase earlier. "Remember," he told him, "God desires mercy, not sacrifice." Mathias nodded with gratefulness. His children, relieved that their trip had not been in vain, held each other's hands intensely. Then Mathias did what he knew he had to, he set the doves free, and turned to his children saying, "God desires us to be merciful like this rabbi rather than making ritual sacrifices. By freeing the doves, we free ourselves." Yeshua smiled in agreement. Then the children began to smile as well. Freedom came that day...

I leave you with two questions to consider today:

- 1) What might you need to free (like the doves) in your life in order to experience true freedom?
- 2) What action might you need to take to assist others in their freedom?