

John 2: 12-22 House cleaning or clearing

Only in the gospel of John does Jesus go to Jerusalem more than once. John's recording of three Passovers in Jerusalem is the basis for understanding that Jesus' ministry lasted three years. Our gospel passage this morning records the first of these visits to Jerusalem for Passover. The passage we have today which is referred to as the cleansing of the Temple occurs during the final week of Jesus' life in the other gospels. In this as in many other ways John's gospel is different. Instead of being at the end of Jesus' ministry, John places this event very near the beginning. John's gospel begins with the well known prologue reminiscent of the opening of Genesis emphasizing Jesus' divinity. Then he records John the Baptist's witness to Jesus' identity and the calling of the first disciples. Chapter two begins with the wedding at Cana where at his mother's urging Jesus performs what John's gospel calls the first sign which reveals his glory. There is no corollary to this story in the other gospel accounts. When comparing the gospel accounts it is helpful to remember that these writers were not writing a history as we understand history today. They were giving a testimony to what they know of this person called Jesus of Nazareth and who he was. Of the four gospel accounts, John contains the most complete theological presentation of Jesus' life and ministry where his divinity predominates. There are long theological discourses, not parables. For this reason some term the Gospel of John the Maverick gospel. John's narrative is a testament to who Jesus is. The transition from the first sign of Jesus' identify comes after the wedding at Cana. Jesus, his brothers, his mother and his disciples go to Capernaum for a few days. John gives no details about what Jesus did during this time. From the other accounts of his time in Capernaum we can assume he was healing the sick and teaching in the synagogue. But as our passage begins Jesus went up to Jerusalem because the Passover was near. He goes to the Temple along with all the others who have come to celebrate Passover. There he finds the courtyard full of not only those who came to worship, but with people selling animals. What happens then is so well known and has been such a notable scene in any dramatization of the gospels that it is easy to overlook that what John sees in these actions is different from the others. Perhaps inclusion of this scene in any dramatic portrayal is just because outside of the crucifixion itself, there are not that many scenes a director can use from the narrative as an "action scene". After all, most of the time Jesus is preaching, teaching, healing and feeding people—all of which are marvelous and great things, but don't have the dramatic impact that the story of driving out the moneychangers from the Temple does. This is certainly one of the few times that we see Jesus acting a little out of that meek and mild character that we are so fond of. But John does not insert this passage where he does to create a sense of drama at the beginning or to challenge our views of Jesus' manner. Instead it appears here in the narrative because he wants to make one very clear and very important point: Once Jesus is on the scene, there is no more need of sacrifice. In this passage, unlike in the other gospels, Jesus does not accuse the moneychangers of making the Temple a den of robbers. The point of his actions is not that their activities have defiled the Temple. His actions are not based on the need to cleanse the Temple. Jesus does drive out all the animals, the cattle, sheep and doves and those who are selling them just as in the other accounts. He pours out the coins of the moneylenders and turns over their tables just as in the other narratives. But what he says is different. He says,

“Stop making my Father’s house a market place.” Jesus is the divine Word present and in the flesh. The sacrifices required under the law are no longer needed. The requirements of the Law created the “marketplace.” People were required to come to the Temple to make sacrifices of cattle, sheep or doves depending upon their individual situation which called for a ritual sacrifice. Some traveled long distances as the only place where sacrifices could occur was at the Temple in Jerusalem. This meant it wasn’t always possible to bring the needed sacrifice along with them on the journey. The presence of the animals for sale in the courtyard was to provide the sacrificial offering. The moneychangers were there because a Temple Tax had to be paid each year. Since the coinage of the land was Roman and had the forbidden image of Caesar with the inscription son of god on it, they had to exchange their coins for those acceptable to the priests of the Temple which would bear no graven image. These things Jesus clears out were in the Temple courtyard in order to allow the people to make the required sacrifices. John is proclaiming a deeper truth that he understands. When Jesus, the Word made flesh comes everything changes. God is now interacting with God’s people in a new way, in a way that will no longer require an animal sacrifice be made at the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus is clearing his Father’s house of the things no longer required for a relationship with God. God is now present among them. Jesus is declaring the ordered transactions of the market place put there to maintain and support the sacrificial structures are no longer needed. Jesus is not commenting on corruption or mismanagement but calling for a complete dismantling of the entire system. By clearing them out of the Temple he makes it impossible to offer sacrifices according to the Law which required the presence of these things. Of course this action is indeed a challenge to the authorities just as it is in the other gospel accounts. In fact, it is more of a challenge because it isn’t about the practices not being done correctly, but about them not needing to be done at all. The authorities then ask Jesus, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” Jesus’ response is typically enigmatic and cryptic. “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” The authorities take his words to be a literal declaration that the Temple where they are standing is what Jesus is referring to. Their response is derisive. They recall that the Temple had just had about the forty-six years construction work done on it during the reign of Herod the Great. John tells us that Jesus was foreshadowing the destruction of his body on the cross and the resurrection which followed three days later. John tells us the disciples who watch Jesus do this are reminded of a scripture which says, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” This is verse 9 from Psalm 69. Within its own context it is an appeal for deliverance from persecution by an innocent suffering servant of the LORD. But from the final comment on this event, it is clear that the disciples have not understood what Jesus was doing. “After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.” We certainly understand that Jesus was referring to his crucifixion and resurrection. There are no sellers of sacrificial animals just outside our sanctuary door. We have graven images on our coins, but they say that in God we trust. Does that mean that the message of this passage is safely in the past? Does it only serve to confirm Jesus’ identity which makes ritual sacrifice unnecessary? The passage from the Hebrew Scriptures for this morning was about the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai. There was no mention of ritual sacrifice in that passage; those things came later. Exodus 20 begins with God speaking these words, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out

of the house of slavery;” God established the relationship before there was any Law given. The Law that was proclaimed was about recognizing God, about honoring God, for God’s claim upon them. The Law given here is also about community—about how to live together. At that time God accompanied the people as they traveled; there was no fixed place of worship in the desert. When Jesus cleared the Temple he was affirming that God’s presence was there to move among them, not confined to a place to come on special occasions to offer praise and sacrifice. Sometimes, although we profess that we know that God’s presence is everywhere with us, it seems that we too try to place God in the box of our sanctuary. We often define the clearest mark of our Christianity to be attending church service or participating in church activities. Most of the rest of our lives—including how we spend our money and time—doesn’t seem to connect clearly to our faith in any meaningful way. We don’t see God’s work as being present in the daily living aspects of how we live this life—the regular and mundane activities of work and family life. By this attitude we unintentionally undervalue these aspects of life as important parts of our faith. This means that those outside the community of faith do not see the importance of our faith. They do not recognize that God is out and about in the world, not just waiting inside for those who come into a church sanctuary. They do not see that we find meaning, identify and a sense of purpose for our lives through our faith. Coming to church is an important part of our faith. Here we hear the proclamation of the Gospel and share in the sacraments which help us to perceive God’s grace most clearly. We gain insight into what God expects of us, and of the steadfast and enduring love of God for us. But then we are sent out from here with a charge—to look for God in the world where we spend most of our time—to partner with God in our various roles and places to love and bless the people and world that God loves so much.