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Lent 3 – John 2:13-22 – The Sign to End All Signs

3/3/24 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, WI

Well, did you hear about the latest terrorist attack? That's what they're calling it anyway. Too often we hear about somebody coming in thinking they can do whatever they want with no regard for anyone else, and a lot of times people get hurt. I don't think anybody got hurt this time, but it sure did sound like this guy made a big mess of things. And it was like he came out of nowhere! Everything was happening like normal, but then all of the sudden people are yelling and running all over the place, animals are going crazy, tables are getting flipped, money's flying around every which way... and they say it was just one guy causing all this trouble – somebody named Jesus from Nazareth.

People have been talking about him like he's some crazy lunatic, but the more I hear, I'm not so sure. There was just something special about him that you wouldn't expect from a radical terrorist. I mean, he wasn't trying to hurt anyone or destroy anything; it was almost like he was just trying to right what was wrong and to help people worship the way God wanted. And I mean, who could argue with that, with the condition the temple was in during the Passover celebration? What an embarrassment, what a travesty that was, all those Jewish religious leaders just getting bigger heads and fuller pockets, taking advantage of anyone they could without even a bit of shame or decency. They set up their market right in the temple courts where the Gentiles were supposed to be able to come to worship (apparently they weren't very welcome), and you wouldn't believe the way they ripped people off – charging an exorbitant exchange fee for the annual temple tax and selling a pair of doves for sacrifice that are normally worth a nickel for as much as \$4 or more during festival time.

The abuses were almost sickening, especially since this was happening in the temple of the living God, of all places. That was the real terror, that was the real atrocity. But when Jesus came – it was almost like this was the Son protecting his Father's house. Finally someone said enough is enough, and so Jesus came and literally turned the tables on everyone making the Passover celebration and making God's temple into such a mockery. Here's what happened: *“He made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, ‘Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!’”* Yes, what Jesus did was swift and strong, but no doubt it was justified. This was no act of terrorism; this was the Son of God, the Messiah, coming in no uncertain

terms to fix what was broken and turn his Father's temple back into the house of prayer that it was always meant to be.

But when the dust settled, the Jews came stomping in to find out just what was going on. *“What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”* We're in charge here, and we don't need some nobody coming in here to mess up the good thing we have going. We have the people right where we want them, eating out of our hands, and we're God's right-hand men, so who do you think you are? (Maybe they didn't say it quite like that, but everyone knew that's what they meant.)

Well, Jesus knew exactly who he was, and so he wasn't intimidated in the least. I mean, these Jews thought they could push Jesus around and talk down to him. Little did they know they were speaking to the Maker of heaven and earth who held their very lives in his hand. They weren't going to push Jesus around. They asked for a sign; well, Jesus had just given them one. He fulfilled Biblical prophecy when he came to clear and cleanse his Father's temple; the disciples remembered how it was written about him in Psalm 69, *“Zeal for your house will consume me.”* And then add to that Malachi 3, *“Suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple... But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap... Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness.”* These Jewish religious leaders, these Old Testament scholars should have expected Jesus' coming. But they didn't expect this. They expected to be commended when the Messiah came, not condemned. But instead Jesus came to purify the temple and refine the LORD's worship so that his people could bring their offerings the right way with dedicated, faithful hearts, just like he always wanted, and without anything to stop them or hinder them.

And along with fulfilling those prophecies, the simple fact that Jesus – just one obscure man at this early point in his ministry – was able to successfully clear out a temple full of dozens if not hundreds of animals and people, including Jewish temple police and a strong Roman military presence nearby, should have made it pretty obvious that this was someone special standing before them.

But that wasn't good enough for the Jews, and it wasn't because they weren't quite convinced yet. It was because they didn't *want* to be convinced. They didn't *want* to believe. They didn't *want* to change. So even though this sign should have been more than enough for them to fall on their knees in honor of their Savior-God who had finally come to deliver them, it was then that

Jesus promised them the sign to end all signs. “*Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.*”

Jesus knew their hearts. He knew their stubborn unbelief. He knew they wanted none of what he offered. He brought grace and truth to his people, freely and generously given; but for those who rejected him, he brought only judgment. And the writing was on the wall for those Jews when they mocked Jesus, “It’s taken forty-six years to build this temple! We’ve had 18,000 people working on this thing at once! It won’t be finished for another 35 years yet! And just you are going to raise it in three days?”

They laughed at him. This temple – *their* temple – could never be torn down by one man. As far as they were concerned, this was the symbol that the Jews were God’s specially chosen people, and that could never change. As long as they were in charge and they controlled the temple, it wasn’t going anywhere. And they would stop at nothing to protect it and to protect themselves, even if it meant killing the one that threatened them – and you know that’s exactly what they had in their minds, because this was the charge they brought against Jesus as he stood trial before his crucifixion (listen to the Passion History Reading this coming Wednesday to hear that story).

Now it is true that Jesus wasn’t really talking about destroying the earthly temple. He was talking about his body. But the fact is that that earthly temple pointed forward to Jesus’ coming and was fulfilled in Christ taking on flesh for us, because if the temple is where God was, then Jesus is who God is. And whereas God promised in Old Testament times to dwell among his people by living in his temple in Jerusalem, he did that in the greatest of ways when the Son of God lived among us in Jesus Christ.

When the Jews killed Jesus, they were destroying God’s true temple in this world. And ironically enough, in a sense, that meant they were also destroying their beloved brick-and-mortar temple right along with it, because all the sacrifices and everything that happened in that temple complex led up to and climaxed in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who sacrificed himself once for all to take away the sins of the world. By killing Jesus, the Jews were putting an end to that whole system of worship and sacrifice; they were making the Jerusalem temple obsolete and irrelevant because the final, ultimate sacrifice that completed the temple’s whole purpose took place when they sent Christ to his cross on Calvary. And even though they tried to hang on after that, God gave those Jews the clearest sign that the temple’s purpose had been finally and forever put to rest when some forty years later it was literally destroyed by a Roman army, never to be rebuilt. In rejecting

Jesus, these Jews were condemning their temple, and worst of all they were even condemning themselves.

See, Jesus promised here not just that he would die, but that he would rise again. And for the people who rejected and killed him then – as well as for people who reject him, his Word, and his worship still today – that’s not good news. That means that one day they will have to stand before the risen, living Lord and answer for everything they did. They may have killed him, but they couldn’t keep him down and they couldn’t stop him from fulfilling God’s perfect plan of salvation for his people. The sign to end all signs, for those who reject Jesus as their Savior in every generation from then even till now, will be when the trumpet sounds on that Last Day and the risen Christ returns to judge the living and the dead.

But for God’s people, for you and me, that sign to end all signs takes on an entirely different meaning. Yes, God’s true temple was destroyed when Jesus died on the cross, but it was raised up again immortal and indestructible three days later when Jesus came out of the grave on Easter morning. This is the greatest sign Jesus ever did and this is all we need, because this is the sign that proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus really is the Son of God, our perfect Savior, who took away our sins and won for us justification and eternal life in heaven. And not only does that mean we have the hope to be with Jesus in heaven one day, but we even have his promise that we too are now temples of God, because he lives in our hearts by faith. Our God lives among us because Jesus walked this earth as one of us, he died to take away our sins and everything that once separated us from him, and he rose again on the third day so that he can be with us always and we can live forever with him in Paradise. This is the sign that meant more than anything else because this sign showed our God’s zeal for us, and it’s the sign to end all signs because none greater could ever be given than for salvation to triumph over sin and for life to rise up out of death. This is the one that assures us that on that Last Day when we see Jesus face-to-face, it won’t be for judgment. It’ll be for grace and our final redemption and everything we’ve ever hoped for forever. Jesus’ resurrection is the sign to end all signs, because that’s how he ended our sin and guilt, that’s how he ended our doubts and fears, and that’s the end we can all look forward to now because it means one day we and all our fellow believers will rise to live with him in a perfect heavenly eternity. God grant it, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.