

“Zeal for your house”

John 2:13-22

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Let me begin with a warning this morning. A bible commentator said this passage might make you feel queasy in the pit of your stomach.¹ This morning we meet Jesus in the role of the prophet, and if we pay attention to what is taking place, it might well make us queasy. Prophets are often associated with judgment, proclaiming God’s wrath and God’s impending punishment. If we think of what happens when Jesus comes to the temple in John 2, if we really think about it, there might be a queasy feeling in the pit of our stomach.

He did what? He took a whip? Jesus took a whip? No, no, no...

- Jesus takes a staff in his hand and tells us, “I am the Good Shepherd.”
- Jesus sits down on a green and grassy knoll and calls the kids to come gather around. Jesus blesses the children.
- Jesus blesses us. He has a whole sermon worth of blessings...blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek...blessing. That’s what Jesus does. Jesus blesses.
- Jesus multiplies, turning a few fish and loaves into an abundant feast.
- Jesus multiplies and Jesus magnifies. He takes ordinary water and makes it into the finest wine.
- Jesus welcomes. “Come to me all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.”
- Jesus loves. “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” Jesus loves.
- Jesus serves. He is the one who takes his robe off and wraps a towel around his waist and washes the feet of his disciples.
- Jesus shows compassion. He wipes the tears of the sinful woman in Luke 7, his heart breaks when he sees a leper, he is the shepherd

¹Paul C. Shupe, Feasting on God’s Word, Year B, Volume 2, p. 92.

who seeks the lost sheep and the woman who crawls on hands and knees to find a lost coin.

That is the Jesus I know. Kind, caring, compassionate, serving, and sacrificing so that we can be saved. And you're telling me he did what? He took a whip. He took a whip and drove everybody out from the temple courts, the sheep and the 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. Stop turning my Father's house into a market." Jesus did all that? With a whip? Nah! Never! Nope! Nope! Nope! Not the Jesus I know. A passage like this, Jesus and his whip, that is enough to make us queasy in the pit of our stomach.

And then again, maybe the commentator has it all wrong. Maybe this passage doesn't make us queasy at all. Maybe this passage gets our juices flowing. Maybe this passage causes us to pump our fist and shout, "Go for it, Jesus! Whip 'em! Whip 'em good!" The prophet Isaiah gives us a generous helping of good news with promises of the wolf and the lamb sleeping together, with God's forgiveness taking our sins that are like scarlet and making them white as snow. He tells us God speaks words of comfort. He tells us God will never forget us, that our names are written on the palms of God's very own hands. It is Isaiah who says, "How lovely on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news," and the prophet brings lots of promises of good news. God will wipe every tear from our eyes. We will not be deserted and desolate. Instead, we will be married to God, our name will be Beulah. The words of the prophet proclaim this wonderful, good news.

But even Isaiah wishes God would break out the whip sometimes. "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!" Uh huh! There's a whole lot of evil out there God, and I wouldn't mind one bit if you ripped apart the heavens, rended the heavens, and came down and made a not so polite visit with all those who mock your name and work against the goodness of your kingdom. You can almost hear Isaiah saying, "Whip 'em! Whip 'em good!"

We know that feeling. When Pharaoh is mocking the Lord and saying, “Who is the Lord that I should obey him?”, break out the whip God. Show Pharaoh who is boss.

Goliath, drooling with threats and boasts against tiny little David. David did not have a whip, but he had a slingshot, and every bone in our body jumps with joy when he plugs a stone in the thick skull of that grotesque giant.

Elijah was a prophet. He broke the whip out on Mount Carmel, face to face with the prophets of Baal. Elijah whipped ‘em, and he whipped ‘em good! Fire came down and burned up all those false prophets.

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild...of course, yes, that’s the Jesus we like. But sometimes, ah, Jesus, sometimes, when the bad just seems to be out of control and injustice rages and the wicked triumph, and the righteous weep, Jesus, get into that temple. Drive them out. Scatter the coins. Turn those tables over. Show them what the whip is all about.

If Isaiah is in favor of a whip, then count me in. “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake.” The prophet is preaching some powerful words of judgment against God’s enemies. That is chapter 64 of Isaiah. If the prophet would have stopped right then, we could all jump on the “Whip ‘em!” bandwagon. But that darned prophet keeps writing, and just a few verses later, a few verses later in the same chapter, Isaiah says, “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins.” (Isaiah 64:6,7) In other words, if Jesus breaks out the whip, we’re gonna be in line, for our own turn, because as the Apostle Paul succinctly and matter of factly puts it, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Interesting, when you put it like that, I kind of get a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Why did Jesus come to this earth? Why did the Word of God become flesh and dwell among us? Was it because we were doing such a good job as humans? Were we firing on all cylinders as we loved God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength...and were we knocking it out of the park as we loved our neighbors as we love ourselves? That gentle Jesus, meek and mild, he did say, "I have come to seek and to save the lost." Ones who are lost, are lost. They have gotten offtrack, wandered, walked in their own way, charted their own course, lived their own lives. When Jesus whips things up, he whips them up in the temple, and he whips them up in the synagogue, and on the seashore, and at the home of the tax collectors, and with the Pharisees and with his own disciples. And he whips things up for us. For you. For me. Jesus whips things up with everyone.

It shouldn't surprise us when Jesus whips things up, people not only get queasy, people get downright angry. Matthew and Luke tell us in their gospel accounts that after Jesus whips up the temple the religious leaders looked for a way to kill him. In our passage this morning, from the Gospel of John, we are not told that the religious leaders looked for a way to kill him. Not at this point. When Jesus whips things up in John, the religious leaders look at him and the mess he has made and they ask, "What gives you the right?" Something along those lines. They say, "What sign can you show us to prove you have the authority to do all this?" Who gave you the authority to come in with your whip a-whaling? Show us some sign that you have the authority to cause such an uproar and upheaval.

In response, Jesus does not show them a sign. Instead, he speaks words that foreshadow the sign that will come, the sign that will show he has the authority to do what he does, including whipping up the temple. Jesus says to the religious leaders, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." This all took place in the temple courts, which are part of the temple itself. Those religious leaders turned around and looked at the temple, magnificent in its glory, radiant in its splendor, and they scratched their heads. "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" In other words, "Good luck with that sign." On this day when Jesus is whipping things

up in the temple, the note John adds is crucial for our understanding. The religious leaders say it took forty-six years to rebuild the temple, and you are going to raise it in three days. John adds this. “But the temple Jesus had spoken of was his body.” And right here, so early in the Gospel, just one story after Jesus was the life of the party, turning water into wine, John drops a huge hint that Jesus will set down that whip and take up the cross.

The whip and the cross might seem to be completely antithetical. Polar opposites. The whip inflicts punishment. The cross bears punishment. The whip causes pain. The cross endures pain. The whip hands out judgment. The cross embodies judgment. We would not be wrong to say the whip displays God’s anger. The cross displays God’s love.

No wonder the whip makes us feel queasy. God’s anger is not something to be trifled with. God really cares about this life we live as humans. And here is something that we must never forget. The anger that is displayed through the whip, through God’s judgment, through God’s punishment, that anger, that judgment, that punishment, is what Jesus takes upon himself when he suffers and dies. God cares deeply about how human beings fall short of God’s glory. To set things right God expresses just how deeply he cares for us as human beings by giving his own life for us on the cross. Perhaps the whip and the cross are antithetical. Perhaps they are polar opposites. They do stand in contrast to one another. But with the cross, God’s judgment and God’s love are not antithetical to one another. On the cross, the depth of God’s judgment is more than matched by God’s overwhelming love.

So instead of turning away from this queasy story about the whip, I want to focus on one thing in particular, the phrase the disciples remembered, which is from Psalm 69. “Zeal for your house will consume me.” When Jesus is whipping things up in the temple, Jesus epitomizes what it means to be zealous. Jesus is filled with zeal. The whip is the symbol of that zeal. But the zeal of Jesus is not against, it is for. Zeal for your house will consume me.” Zeal for whose house? Jesus had just called the temple, “My Father’s house.” Zeal for his Father’s

house would consume Jesus. Each stroke of that whip could have been only a stroke against...against the moneychangers, against those selling doves, against those trafficking their cattle and sheep. But his zeal is not just against...his zeal is for, the zeal of Jesus is a deep passion for his Father's house.

His zeal is a stroke against hypocrisy...but it is also a stroke for humility. His whip is against praying and fasting and giving alms with one eye on how other people see you. His whip is against that type of worship, worship that is concerned with appearances and worship that wants to be noticed and worship that draws attention to itself.

His zeal is a stroke against hypocrisy...but it is also a stroke for humility. For Jesus, a widow giving just a few coins, a tax collector beating his breast and throwing himself upon the mercy of the Lord. The zeal of Jesus clears his Father's house of hypocritical worship so that the worshipers of God can come with humble and sincere hearts. The zeal of Jesus is a stroke against fasting that is concerned with outward appearances, but more importantly, it is a stroke for another kind of fasting, the fasting the prophet said the Lord desired, fasting that will loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, a fasting that will set the oppressed free...a fasting that will share food with the hungry and provide for the poor wanderer a shelter...a fasting that sees the naked and clothes them. Zeal for his Father's house is a stroke against hypocrisy, but please do not forget it is also a stroke for humble and heartfelt worship, worship where our love for God leads us to reach out with love for our neighbor.

Jesus does not gloss over the great failures of humanity. Jesus makes a whip out of cords. The zeal Jesus has for his Father's house encompasses every square inch of every temple and every sanctuary and every house of worship, and his zeal extends beyond these places. The zeal Jesus has for his Father's house embraces and encompasses all of humanity, because this whole world, all creatures great and small belong to God. The zeal of Jesus embraces and encompasses this world, and it embraces and encompasses us as human beings. We belong to God, and wherever there is heartache or sorrow, wherever there is cruelty or racism or greed, wherever the needs of the poor and oppressed are

ignored or trampled upon, wherever violence rages, wherever life is demeaned on any level, on every level, the zeal of our Lord comes with a whip to drive out all that is false and wicked and against God and against humanity.

And somehow, in a way only Jesus could do, in a way only the Beloved Son of the Father could do, Jesus fashions a whip out of cords, and yet somehow, by the time his temple is destroyed, and by the time he has given his life on the cross, and by the time he has defeated the devil and his demons, by the time he has driven out the darkness and brought the light of God's love, somehow by the time he has suffered and died and risen again from the dead, somehow that whip made out of cords is transformed so that those cords are revealed as the very bonds of love that rescue and redeem us. Instead of a whip that drives us away, these cords of love wrap us up and draw us in and bring us securely to the side of Jesus, where we can rest in his mercy and grace, and where we can walk in his light and live into the fullness of his love. We might even say by the time Jesus clears out all those things that are working against God, by the time Jesus has removed our sin as far from us as the east is from the west, you might even say by the time Jesus and his whip have cleared all that other stuff out, the way is clear for us to love God with all our heart, our soul, our mind, and our strength...and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.