

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – March 7, 2021 – Preserving Justice
Psalm 19:1-14 and John 2:13-22**

For thousands of years, the Jewish faithful have gathered to remember *the* fundamental event in Israel’s history, the celebration of its liberation from Egypt.¹ This year, the festival of the Passover begins on Saturday, March 27th. And as you may recall, in his lifetime, Jesus and his extended family also took part in the Passover, joining the nearly three million religious pilgrims who descended upon Jerusalem to mark this sacred occasion.

The massive influx of visitors streaming into the holy city had often traveled great distances to get there. Many of them arrived on foot following journeys that may have lasted for weeks. And once they reached their destination, these individuals required places to sleep, and water both for drinking and cleansing themselves. And they also required animals. Lots of animals. Specifically, “cattle, sheep, and doves,” which were used for “burnt offerings in the Temple.”²

We all recognize that traveling in a modern context is so much easier than it once was. And yet, even now, long distance travel it still complicated by the presence

¹ Gail R. O’Day, *John, The New Interpreter’s Bible in XII Volumes, Volume IX*, ed. Leander Keck, (Abingdon Press, 1995), 542.

² O’Day, 542.

of a pet. Just like us, they have needs. And at various points along the way, our canine passenger, or whatever kind of animal it may be, requires us to stop for food, and drink, and so that they can leave their calling card on the perfect blade of grass at the rest area. And the more often that we stop to attend to these needs, the longer it takes to reach our destination.

For similar reasons, many who embarked on the Passover pilgrimage did not bring their animals along with them. Which means that a significant number arrived in Jerusalem in search of offerings that they could purchase.³ What resulted was an expansive marketplace in the temple courtyard, which included not only the buying and selling of animals, but the payment of a temple tax, as well – one half shekel for the upkeep of the religious facility and grounds.

Taxes, as we all know, are rarely popular, and debates regarding the collection and allocation of resources are as old as the practice itself. As an oft-conquered people, the Jews were particularly sensitive to the practice of sending their treasure to the coffers of foreign empires who worshiped a plurality of gods. Understandably, religious authorities feared that the people would assimilate into the dominant culture, that they would abandon their shared identity, that they would become

³ O'Day, 543.

transfixed with idols, and that they would forget about their covenant with the one, true God.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is asked whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not. In response, he replies, "'show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's.'"

So even before Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for what Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe as his last Passover celebration, the presence of foreign currency was already a heated topic. Temple authorities simply would not accept Greek or Roman coinage because the emperor's image on the coins was considered a slippery slope toward idolatry. Therefore, all foreign currency had to be changed into the legal, Tyrian form in Jerusalem.⁴ Such a system naturally lent itself to abuse, with some charging too much for the animals and others collecting too much tax.

In our second lesson this morning, Jesus enters into the relative peace of the crowded temple in dramatic fashion. Sensing the injustice of the system, he procures

⁴ O'Day, 543.

a whip of cords, and begins wildly cracking it. The animals, already confined, begin fiercely resisting their handlers. Nervous and afraid, they begin to scatter. Jesus then took hold of the tables, flipping and slamming them to the floor as an avalanche of coins raced across the courtyard in every direction.

Can you imagine that scene? Of onlookers gasping and fleeing, while others stood as still as marble statues, frozen in place from fear? Can you imagine Jesus shouting, “stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” Can you imagine the temple authorities rushing to the scene in an attempt to regain control of the chaos?

Diane Chen observes that “a solo protest that is too small even to attract Roman guards will not stop all commercial activities within the temple precincts. Business will resume the following day, if not sooner.”⁵ Therefore, it appears that Jesus’ action here is symbolic in nature, aimed primarily at “exposing the spiritual corruption of the temple” and “its power brokers.”⁶

And in the midst of this confrontation, Jesus seals his fate by implying that “he is the embodiment of God’s presence.” It is this assertion that will lead to either

⁵ Diane G. Chen, *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 72. Chen, 71.

⁶ Chen, 71.

an insight into his divine origin or a charge of blasphemy.”⁷ How one interprets his actions is, of course, a matter of perspective.

C.S. Lewis famously suggested that Jesus was either a lunatic, a liar, or the Lord. In making this claim, Lewis joined a long line of Christian apologists who maintain that Jesus has the unique authority to challenge the structures of the Temple because his whole life bears testimony to the power of God in the world.⁸ Lewis encourages us to look at Jesus’ life in its entirety, to consider the source, and to recognize that he has authority in situations where others do not.

Yet, those in authority rarely go unchallenged. The same was true for Jesus who was accused of wrongdoing on many fronts and who was asked for a sign of his divine endorsement. Throughout John’s narrative, “Jesus faces hostility in Jerusalem. He is called a sinner and a Samaritan, and is accused of blasphemy and demon possession. Multiple attempts [are made] to arrest, stone, or kill him.”⁹ In response, Jesus boldly maintains that he *is* that sign, and suggests that three days following his death, his body would arise as the purified temple.¹⁰

⁷ Chen, 72.

⁸ O’Day, 543.

⁹ Chen, 72.

¹⁰ Chen, 72.

Even during Lent, we are people of resurrection hope. We remember our friends, like Edie Willoughby, who are no longer with us. And we make the bold proclamation that she has now entered eternal life. We affirm that the sign of Jesus' life is trustworthy and true, that every hostility is finally conquered in and through him, and that the pursuit of justice and life everlasting continues. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.