

January 21, 2018 Epiphany 3 Manor Road United Church Rev. Debra Schneider
Psalm 19 John 2:13-22 “Provocateur Extraordinaire!”

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this event often referred to as, “The Cleansing of the Temple,” happens near the end of Jesus’ ministry, and is presented as the event that incites the religious leadership of the day against him, and ultimately leads to his crucifixion. In John’s gospel, on the other hand, ‘The Cleansing of the Temple,’ is told as the inaugural event of Jesus’ public ministry. Here, in this gospel, Jesus bursts onto the scene as Provocateur Extraordinaire.

In John’s gospel, Jesus does not enter our Christian narrative as a babe born of a virgin in a Bethlehem stable-- nor is his birth attended by angels or shepherds. Instead, Jesus explodes through the cosmos, entering into our world as, ‘The Word who was from the beginning, The Word encountered in Genesis 1--in and who through all things are made. The Word, born of God, comes to dwell among us as light, grace, and truth.

Early in John’s gospel, John The Baptizer, baptizes Jesus, and proceeds to point his own disciples in Jesus’ direction, calling him ‘The Lamb of God.’ Quick as a whip, Jesus calls his first disciples. He spends a few days in Capernaum, and BAM!!! He strides directly into the center of Jewish religious and cultural life, bursts into The Temple courtyard and wreaks havoc on one of the busiest festival days of the year! (Strangely reminds me of a small ballerina in attendance at our Fall Fair... intrigued by that bright red fire alarm! And a little of some of you, as you have entered into our life here!)

Jesus’ first public act is as provocateur extraordinaire. As a result of his actions, the temple precincts are thrown into a shambles and a near riot erupts! He leaves behind the religious leadership in shock and outrage, and a mess of confusion and disarray all around. Worshipers beware! The Jesus encountered in this gospel is not Mary’s boy child meek and mild.

Author, Charles West writes, “We turn to God when our foundations are shaking, only to discover that it is God shaking them!” This gospel narrative certainly supports that claim! The temple officials, the bankers, the buyers, and the sellers... have worked out a profitable and efficient way of doing things that is more or less meeting folks’ needs...likely, as is usual, meeting the desires of the few-- more, and meeting the needs of the many — much less. The temple get a percentage on sales and exchange, the sellers make a respectable profit, and the pilgrims don’t need to fool around with transporting animals on the pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem. Everybody wins... right?

Except, Jesus is raging: “You have turned my Father’s house into a market place!” “My Father’s House.” In these most sacred of days, you fill the heavens with the stench of exploitation, and pierce the ears of the Almighty with the cacophony of your buying and selling! This is house of the God—the house of the One who desires you to come near, and to touch into the possibility of life--rich and abundant!

I am reminded of the words of Dylan Thomas:

*Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

Jesus was raging against the dying of the light with a wild and passionate longing for that precious covenant relationship between God and Israel to be renewed; for the law to once again be understood as a sweet blessing; and his Father’s House restored as a place of true spiritual worship-- opening out to God’s people-- God’s people, created to live in loving relationship with God and with neighbour; and destined to serve as a light to the nations. Jesus saw that precious light being snuffed out by arrogance and greed, by convenience and efficiency, by neglect and callous disregard for all that is sacred and good. Railing against the dying of the light, he brandishes a whip, and disrupts the status quo.

Ted Orland and David Bayles, in their book *Art and Fear*, write, “Your life mirrors what you put into it or withhold from it. When you are lazy, it is lazy, when you hold back, it holds back. When you hesitate, it stands there staring, hands in its pockets. But when you commit, it comes on like blazes.” John’s Jesus stands before us this morning as one who commits! From that first moment in ministry, Jesus throws himself whole into his mission, caring little for the personal consequences—we see a man who comes on like blazes!

There are so many places in our personal lives, in our families, in our church, and in our world where we encounter the dying of the light-- so many things that get in the way of wholeness, of holiness, and the joy of creation and creator. We can rage against the dying of the light, we can find ways to kindle the light anew, or we can stand with our hands in our pockets. In the *Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins speaks words with which I can easily

identify: "We're just plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures (substitute 'passions' here) Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things. Make you late for dinner. I can't think what anybody sees in them."

How often we choose to live more like Bilbo Baggins than like Jesus! I wonder how many of us are willing to open ourselves to God's passionate dreams for us as God's people and for the world around us?

It is interesting, I think, that this whole gospel passage begins with words so nondescript that they easily fall under our radar: "After this Jesus went down to Capernaum with his mother and brothers and his disciples. There they stayed for a few days." I wonder what happened in those days? Did they open their hearts to one another sharing their heartaches and their hopes, their disappointments, and their dreams for the future? Did they search the scriptures for a way forward? Did they join hearts and voices in prayer? Did they listen to the seemingly discordant voices in their midst for the uncomfortable truths they too might carry? Did they listen for the divine whisper in and through all these things?

We often act as if we know the way ahead both for ourselves, and for us as a community of faith. I believe, however, that if we are to live as Christ's disciples, we need to take the time to ponder our lives in light of our scriptures, to talk with one another, reflect, rest, pray in order to sharpen our focus. We need time to allow God to re-ignite the flame within our hearts and minds, and to reorient our lives again and again, that together we might rage against the dying of the light... and perhaps kindle anew the fires that will light the way ahead for ourselves and those we love.