

## I

When I was about 12 or 13 years old, our family planned a trip to Washington, D.C. The day before we left, I remember being in the car with my dad and being amazed as he withdrew cash from the ATM for the trip. It wasn't probably wasn't more than a few hundred dollars, but I'm sure to that point in my young life I'd never seen so much cash at once.

A few days later, mom, dad, and I were walking the busy streets of our nation's capital in a fairly large crowd of people, and for reasons passing my understanding to this day, in a very loud voice, I said, "Hey Dad, do you still have all that cash in your wallet right now?"

Dad shot me a Dad look, and later that evening when we were back in our hotel room, Dad reminded me of the importance of keeping a low profile and not drawing attention to yourself, especially when you're traveling to a new city.

## II

And that's sound advice, isn't it? When we're traveling, especially in a big city, it's good advice to do all that you can to blend in with the crowd, to look less like a tourist and more like a temporary local, to go about your business without drawing too much attention to yourself.

But apparently, Jesus once made a trip to Jerusalem and had other ideas about keeping a low profile.

## III

Before we get to our story for today, let's do a quick review of some biblical history. Hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, through a series of events, the people of God found themselves living in the Land of Egypt, and eventually the people of God became enslaved by the Egyptians.

About 1,400 years before the birth of Jesus, God sent a man named Moses to lead God's people out of their bondage in Egypt. Moses told the people of God to get ready by slaughtering a lamb at twilight and to mark the doorposts of their homes with the lamb's blood. That evening, the angel of passed through the Land of Egypt, and passed over the houses marked with the lamb's blood, but struck down the firstborn of the Egyptians. When dawn came, the Egyptian Pharaoh told Moses to take God's people and leave Egypt. Over time, this event came to be observed annually by a holiday called Passover, commemorating the deliverance of God's people from their bondage in Egypt.

Moses led the people of God out of Egypt, and eventually they came to a mountain called Sinai. At the top of Mt. Sinai, God met with Moses and gave him instructions about how God expected God's people to live together, and these instructions became known as the Ten Commandments.

Moses wrote these Ten Commandments on two stone tablets, and when he came down the mountain, the

people of God placed the tablets in a special box called the Ark of the Covenant. Upon God's instructions, they also built something called a tabernacle hold the Ark of the Covenant, essentially a tent that the people of God would set up and take down as they moved from place to place. In those early days, the tabernacle came understood as God's presence with God's people.

About 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus, an Israelite king by the name of David established Jerusalem as his capital city. David built himself a grand palace in Jerusalem, and he gave orders that the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant should be brought to his new capital. King David then had the bright idea that instead of a mobile tent, the Ark of the Covenant should be housed there in Jerusalem in a grand temple. God told David that God didn't really need or want a fancy building, but if that's what David wanted to do, so be it, but it would be his son King Solomon who saw the project through to completion.

And so that's how Jerusalem came to be the capital city of ancient Israel, and the Temple in Jerusalem came to be the center of their identity as a people of faith.

However, about 600 years before Jesus was born, Jerusalem was invaded by the Babylonian army, and the Babylonians destroyed the Temple and ripped it down to the foundations. But some years later, the Babylonians were vanquished by the Persians, and the Israelites were allowed to return to Jerusalem and begin rebuilding the city, including the Temple.

So by the time Jesus came of age and began his public ministry in the early first century, for the people of God, Jerusalem wasn't just any city. It was their capital that had been established by their greatest king.

The Temple wasn't just any building. It was the very center of their religious identity, the place that they believed to be the very dwelling place of God on earth.

And at the time of Passover, Jesus made a trip to the big city of Jerusalem to visit the Temple. But while he was there, he would keep anything but a low profile.

So we're picking up right where we left off in John's gospel last week, in John chapter 2, beginning at verse 13. I invite you now to listen for a Word from God.

*The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "This*

*temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22 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. 23 When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. 24 But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people 25 and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Imagine the shock of the people, when on this holiest of days, and in this holiest of places, this Nazarene, this out-of-towner, comes roaring in making such a scene in the very center of the people's religious, political, and economic identity and at the time of one of their holiest days.

Imagine their outright disbelief as he drives the cattle and sheep out the door and then turns to the tables of the money changers and flips them over, sending hundreds of coins clattering all over the stone floor!

I imagine that for a few beats, everyone was silent and still, not able to believe what they had just seen and heard. I imagine that the Temple Police began to slowly close in, hands on their weapons.

And then, someone standing nearby said, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" In other words, "Hey, Bub, just exactly who do you think you are? By whose authority do you come in here causing such a ruckus?"

And Jesus gives a rather cryptic answer. He says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

Now I imagine that those standing near him thought that he must be Looney Tunes. I imagine that they stole a quick glance at the huge structure, some of it still covered in scaffolding, and said, "This temple has been under construction for 46 years, and you will raise it up in three days?"

How Jesus escaped arrest by the temple police then and there, I don't know. But we're only halfway through the second chapter of John's gospel, Jesus now has the full attention of the powers that be.

So much for keeping a low profile in the big city.

But this is not ultimately a story about corrupt exchange rates or exorbitant pricing. This is not ultimately a story about a breach of decorum. This is a story about the claims that Jesus makes about who he is and what he's about. This is a story about the Lordship of Jesus of Nazareth.

In the first chapter of John's gospel, we read "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory

as of a Father's only Son, full of grace and truth."

But there's something here that's worth noting in our translation, because in the original language of the text, the literal translation of "Word became flesh and lived among us" is "Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us."

Jesus cleanses the temple because he is God *tabernacled* among us.

In other words, Jesus cleanses the Temple because he's making a claim over it. The claim of this story right here near the beginning of John's gospel is that Jesus not just another rabbi, not just another rabble-rouser.

Jesus is God *tabernacled* among us, and there is nowhere that his authority and Lordship does not extend.

#### IV

That's the central confession of the Christian faith – Jesus is Lord. In our Presbyterian way of being the church, that's the only question that must be answered affirmatively to become an active member of the church – to affirm that Jesus is Lord.

And at first glance, that seems like no big deal.

But what happens when that faith – that Jesus is Lord - runs into competing claims?

Because my friend, here's a truth from theologian Bob Dylan. You might like to gamble, you might like to dance, you might be ambassador to England or France, but you're gonna serve somebody. Everybody serves somebody.

There can be only one Lord.

So beware, my friend. For to make the simple confession that Jesus is Lord has the potential to create some dissonance when that faith claim bumps into other claims on your life.

The turning over of the tables of the money changers got everyone's attention, then and now. If Jesus is Lord, then the dollar cannot be. As a pastor friend of mine likes to say, in your baptism, even your wallet got wet.

The bystanders asked, "What sign can you show us for this?" In other words, "By whose authority to do you such things?" If Jesus is Lord, then no earthly ruler, no public figure, no matter how popular or powerful, can be Lord.

If Jesus is Lord, then there is nothing and there is no one else who can be. This is not a portrait of Jesus gentle, meek, and mild. Jesus flips over tables and makes a big scene, because Jesus is neither meek nor mild when it comes to you, my friend.

There's nothing that Jesus would not give for you, my friend, including his very life. There's nowhere that Jesus would not go for you, including through the very gates

of hell itself. Not because of anything you've said or not said, and not because of anything you've done or not done, not because of where you come from or who your people are, but because you belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to the government, not to the economy, even to your own family, but you belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to him.

So let me ask you, is there a part of your life that you're holding back from the Lordship and authority of Jesus Christ? Are there things in your life that have accumulated over a long period of time that you know aren't quite right and need to be driven out? Are there some treasures that you've been guarding in your heart that need to be flipped over and surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus Christ today?

## V

To be honest, for most of us who come from the Presbyterian branch of the Christian family tree, stories like this one make us a little nervous. We come by the nickname the Frozen Chosen honestly. We pride ourselves on doing the work of the church decent and in order, and making chords of whips and flipping over tables doesn't seem very decent or in order.

But when it comes to evaluating claims of the authority and Lordship of Jesus, there can be no half measures. There can be no delays. Jesus demonstration in the public square creates a crisis that cannot be ignored or swept under the rug.

This weekend we mark the birthday of a Georgia preacher who used the power of nonviolent direct action to draw attention to rot and decay in our public life together that had too long been ignored. Time and again, he was told "We sympathize with your cause, but not your methods. Perhaps there will be a better season, a better time."

But in his words, the time is always right to do right.

And so I'm mindful that we can't be together in person today because of the weather. And I'm mindful that tomorrow's opportunities to serve our community have been canceled. But here's my hope for us, for we who live out our discipleship together at First Presbyterian Church. Let us not use the weather or the pandemic or any other reason as an excuse. The time is always right to do right.

So let us find a way to love somebody in Jesus name this weekend. Let us find a way to serve somebody in Jesus name this weekend.

Let us write a letter of encouragement to someone with whom we haven't corresponded with in some time.

Let us write a letter to one of our elected leaders and ask them how we can be in prayer for them, and urge them to use their power and their voice in the service of justice and liberty for all.

Let us read a book or watch a film that was written or produced by someone

who comes from a race or gender or culture than our own.

There is a sense of growing darkness in our world today. There are wars and rumors of wars. There is disease and pestilence. There is hatred and enmity.

But as that Georgia preacher reminds us, darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.

And as the Gospel reminds us, in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the Word has become flesh, and tabernacled among us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.