



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## Breaking and Creating

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 7, 2021  
The Third Sunday in Lent  
Based on John 2:13-22*

*Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Back in February of 2020, a friend and I purchased Broadway show tickets, and we were looking forward to enjoying an upcoming performance soon thereafter. Weeks later, however, those plans were upended when all forty-one Broadway theaters were shuttered due to the coronavirus outbreak. It's hard to believe that it has been a full year. Since then, of course, the pandemic has crippled the live theater industry. But this morning's gospel narrative had me thinking that no Broadway show could ever compare with the spectacle that unfolded in that first-century Jerusalem temple courtyard, the backdrop for the dramatic event in today's gospel reading. It was a jaw-dropping, climactic scene; gentle Jesus, meek and mild, had had enough! I admit that I would have paid Broadway scalper-ticket prices just to see that!

Imagine standing in the temple courtyard in ancient Jerusalem. The Jewish Passover celebration is soon approaching and your eyes survey the bustling scene in preparation for its arrival. We are aware of the sounds, the scents, the clatter of coins on the tables; the not so pleasant odors coming from the animals as we hear the snorts and grunts of cattle, the bleating of sheep and the cooing of doves. There are the shouts and clamor of deals being made and the quick banter of bartering and negotiation.

A young rabbi from Galilee enters into the courtyard. And as our eyes focus in on this rabbi Jesus, we see his countenance alter. He becomes incensed, filled with righteous indignation and zeal for his Father's house of prayer.

He comes to the temple—to the place of the presence of the living God—to pray and worship and to give honor and praise. Instead, he finds that all the focus is on business—it is a booming marketplace in there. Suddenly a whirlwind of forceful anger erupts from him as the traders and vendors attempt to scramble out of his way, scattering their money in the process. This is a new side of Jesus that we have never seen before and it is disquieting.

Perhaps we would protest and say that the animal vendors and the presence of the moneychangers seemed appropriate. After all, it was impossible to offer sacrifices according to the law without buying the animals that were needed to do so. Both the selling of animals for sacrifices and the payment of the temple taxes were compulsory by Jewish law and essential to the temple's functions. But Jesus saw that the people had gone too far and that the business aspect superseded the true purpose of the temple, which was for prayer and worship. Imagine such a raucous scene taking place in the narthex of St. Bart's,

not too far from the altar where we will one day gather together again for the Eucharist. It would appear to be very out of place, jarring and unsettling.

But Jesus' actions also pointed to a crucial theological truth that needed to be illustrated, since many people were unwilling to accept that he truly was the Messiah. His zeal in those moments was not out of touch with reality, for the reality was that the business transactions occurring in that courtyard would soon become obsolete. No more animal sacrifices would ever be needed, for Jesus would be the ultimate sacrifice on the cross to fulfill the law.

He was, as John the Baptist proclaimed, "the sacrificial lamb who takes away the sin of the world" and who fulfilled the plan and purpose of God. No other burnt offering could be sufficient to permanently satisfy God's wrath against sin. The old system of Jewish laws of presenting burnt offerings gave only a dim foretaste of the good things Christ would do (Hebrews 10:1), for those sacrifices pointed only to expectation, but not fulfillment. The shed blood of the offerings merely covered over sins, but it took Jesus to come and die on the cross and offer his own lifeblood to forever take away those sins, a one-time sacrifice for evermore.

The temple was the center of Jewish life because God was the central axis around which all of life unfolded and emerged. After the disruption in the courtyard, Jesus goes on to declare that a new temple will be found in his own resurrected body; that instead of believing God's presence to be confined to a brick and mortar building, God's Spirit will be everywhere, making all things new, and giving us, as we read the book of Ezekiel, hearts of flesh instead of hearts of stone (Ezekiel 26:36), signifying the love, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing grace, eternal peace and transformative hope that *will* have the last word, instead of sin and death.

God is a God whose love cannot be bought, who does not need to be negotiated with, who does not need to be bargained with. A God who loves us fiercely, unendingly and unconditionally. With that in mind, the apostle Paul addresses the people of Corinth—and us—when he asks, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Cor. 3:16). Have we really grasped this monumental reality that we are living temples in which the Word of God has come alive?

Jesus, in this dramatic scene in that first century temple courtyard, also reveals something else for us in our 21st century world, and that is the need to dismantle the framework of certain systems which no longer serve us, in order to rebuild anew. We've all witnessed in this past year the inequities that starkly surfaced due to this pandemic. Even while COVID-19 remains a disease that affects all segments of the population, we know that the U.S. healthcare network is embedded with systemic unjust inequalities that negatively and more onerously impact the most oppressed, marginalized, and vulnerable populations, especially in the wake of this virus. We know that our social, economic and political fabric is in disrepair.

We know that what we consider to be the status quo cannot be sustained; as it has often been said, the only ones who approve of the status quo are the ones who have the status. Like Jesus' actions in the temple courtyard, we know what needs to be broken down, overturned, poured out, reworked and changed in our society in order for new and just structures, systems, attitudes, and actions to take their place, not only within our own institutions, but within our own hearts and minds.

Writing on the concepts of race, class and caste in America, author James Baldwin, in his collection of essays published in 1961 entitled *Nobody Knows My Name*, observed, "Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety."<sup>1</sup> The year 2020 brought us face to face with this accurate understanding in our own real-life drama as we lived—and continue to live—through this pandemic. Yet we need not fear or fall prey to the notion of "the end of safety," for Christ is our safety, our refuge and strength, and an ever-present help in

trouble (Psalm 46:1). The resurrected Christ, who called out the old and ushered in the new, helps us not to fear the breaking and remolding of systems, but to be present in the creating. *Let us not fear the breaking, but be present in the creating.*

Professor Steven Charleston, who was the bishop of the Diocese of Alaska and who is a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, writes eloquently about “not fearing the breaking but being present to the creating” in his book *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus*. Bishop Charleston asserts that, “Jesus was not afraid to speak about what he saw and heard and felt, and consequently he changed the world. Now you and I are called to do the same... We are human, weak and without power. But if we take the risk, if we make the effort, if we claim our own sacred space [as Jesus reclaimed the temple and] invite the vision of God into our lives, we will be transformed [and become transformative agents.] We will receive the wisdom and blessing of God and be given all we need to do our part in rolling back the evil that separates us from one another, and from all living things around us.”<sup>ii</sup>

We *will*...with God’s help.

*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, Vintage Books, New York City, 1992 (reissue edition)

<sup>ii</sup> Steven Charleston, *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus*, Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 2015, p. 40

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