

Jesus Is in Charge Here!

John 2:13–22 (NIV) ¹³ When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.” ¹⁸ The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” ²⁰ They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

In Christ Jesus, the Lord of our lives, dear fellow redeemed,

Do you have a favorite portrait of Jesus – one that captures the way you typically think of him? I have a couple. One going back to my childhood. It’s a painting by Richard Hook entitled “Head of Christ.” I find this portrait so inviting. The other favorite is a painting by Del Parson, called “The Lost Lamb,” in which our Good Shepherd hold in his arms a precious lamb he has rescued.

Both of this “favorites” of mine portray Jesus as I always imagine him – so kind, so caring, compassionate and loving. This is the Jesus I know from Scripture, the one who so loves me, and you, and all the world. So, it might seem a bit shocking, perhaps even disturbing to find such a different picture of Jesus in our gospel reading for today. This Jesus doesn’t cradle a lost lamb in his arms. He holds a whip in his hand as drives both sheep and cattle from the temple courts. This Jesus doesn’t seem so inviting, does he, as he flips tables and scatters the coins of money changers in his Father’s house on earth.

As I say, this is not the way we usually picture Jesus, but don’t be alarmed. This is not a psychotic episode, or some dark side of the Christ exposed for all to see. In fact, there is nothing at all frightening or even embarrassing about what we are witnessing here today. This is the same Jesus we know, our Jesus, the one who does love us so that he’s willing to tell us what we need to hear, even when the message might be hard for us sinners to take. Today the message is simple: Jesus Is in Charge Here! And as the one charge, 1) He wants to be the focus of our worship; and 2) he wants to be the source of our hope.

Here in John 2, we find Jesus in the earliest days of his ministry. He has just revealed his glory at a private wedding in Cana. Now the first public act of Jesus’ ministry that John records is the Savior’s visit to the temple in Jerusalem. Together with tens of thousands of pilgrims, Jesus has come to celebrate the Passover. He enters the temple grounds. Picture an area the size of ten football fields. He comes to what is called the Court of the Gentiles, the sacred place of worship for all the non-Jews who have come to know the one true God. But instead of reverent worshipers, Jesus finds what we might compare to a livestock exhibit at a country fair with all the sounds, and sights, and smells that such an event has to offer.

What is going on here? There’s a logical explanation. Just ask anyone involved. The animals were made available for purchase by the pilgrims who had come great distances. This way they didn’t have to bring a suitable sacrifice all the way from home. The same was true in the case of

the money changers. Those coming from great distances had to convert their foreign currency into shekels, the only acceptable form of money with which to pay the temple tax. This was all done in the name of convenience for the worshippers and profit for the temple and its leaders.

All of this chaos was set against the backdrop of Passover, one of the most sacred festivals of the year. Passover, as you might recall, celebrated the miraculous way in which God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt. The LORD passed over the homes of his believers whose doorways were covered by the blood of the Passover lamb. Where there was no blood, there was only death and mourning.

God himself directed that the Passover be commemorated each year, not only as a reminder of his past faithfulness, but more importantly, as a picture of a better Passover to come – when a perfect Lamb with perfect blood would free God’s people from sin’s slavery and hell’s destruction. In Jesus the Passover would find its perfect fulfillment. And now that fulfillment had come! In fact, in the months just prior to this Passover celebration, John the Baptist had announced Jesus to be “...**the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**” (John 1:29).

Look! This same Lamb, God in human flesh, comes to his Father’s house, his dwelling on earth to find what? A greed-driven enterprise that looked more like a zoo than a worship service. Imagine how upsetting that must have been. But understand the reason for Jesus’ righteous anger. All that activity was distracting the worshippers from what was most important. Rather than concentrating on the message of Passover, rather than focusing on the promised Christ and all he would accomplish for them, their hearts and minds were lost in the most mundane matters of life. Worship for these people had become a matter of showing up and going through the motions. Jesus was beside himself as he witnessed this tragedy – the very people he had come to rescue were passing up the opportunity to learn of God’s love for them and be freed from the very burdens that were at the heart of all that was distracting them from worship. So, what did Jesus do? “...**he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.** ¹⁶ **To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!”** (John 2:15-16). By his actions Jesus let it be known, “I’m in charge here.” Get rid of these distractions!

I suspect I know how we would feel if we had come to this house of worship today and found that a county fair had broken out. Like Jesus, we may have looked for a whip as we wondered how anyone could have thought to do such a thing to our beautiful church. Of course, that didn’t happen. We found the sanctuary ready for worship. But here’s the question: Did God find our hearts and minds just as ready for worship? Or did we come with our own set of distractions that are stealing our attention away from what is supposed to be happening here? What’s distracting you today? The quarrel you had on the drive here? The math exam scheduled for Monday? The “insufficient funds” notice you got from your bank? The medical test results you’re waiting for? Don’t look now, but here comes Jesus. You can tell by the look on his face that he’s in charge here. With voice raised he says of our distractions: “Get these out of here!”

His words shake us from a daydream. We’re a bit shocked. “But Jesus,” we object, “Where’s your compassion? Where’s the empathy? I’m hurting. What do you want from me? Isn’t it enough that I showed up? That’s an interesting question. I don’t know about you, but I find it easy to fall into the trap of thinking of worship as something I do for Jesus in exchange for all that he does for me. But that’s not what worship is. Yes, in worship I acknowledge that Jesus is worthy to receive my thanks and praise and I give it to him in words spoken and sung. But there’s no exchange going on. There is only gratefulness from me, a miserable beggar, given to the God whose love I could never earn or repay. Even in worship we are the ones on the receiving end of God’s amazing grace as we give our attention to Jesus who wants to be, needs to be the focus of our worship.

Why? Because we sinners can’t see the forest for the trees. We’re so consumed with the latest/biggest problem in our lives that we lose sight of what is at the heart of all our troubles – sin

in us and around us. Instead we get it in our heads that if Jesus would only fix this big thing that's going wrong in our lives, then all will be right with the world once again. Do you see the danger here? If we treat Jesus as nothing more than a "handyman" who fixes stuff, we run the risk of ruining our relationship with him – not because we might hurt his feelings, but because we will fail to grasp the greatest thing that he's done for us. In fact, we might even get angry and walk away from him because we conclude that he's not living up to our expectations- he's not solving my problems. What good is he?

Thank God that Jesus refuses to let that happen. He comes to us today and every day telling us things that we may not want to hear, but need to hear about our sin, including the sin of failing to focus on the things that matter most to our eternal life. Jesus wants to be the focus of our worship not because he's narcissistic, but because he wants to be the source of our hope – eternal hope that fills us, right here and now, with peace even in the face of trouble, peace that passes all understanding.

That's what Jesus wanted for those worshiping at the temple. That's why he took whip in hand. The disciples understood. They remembered the passage from Psalm 69 that says: **"Zeal for your house will consume me."** (John 2:17). God's house is not a structure of stone but of souls. Jesus' zeal was for the people. He would stop at nothing to save them.

"What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" (John 2:18). That's what the religious leaders wanted to know. If Jesus didn't like what they were doing for the people, providing sacrificial animals and a way for the people to pay their temple tax, what would Jesus do better? Jesus answered them, **"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."** (John 2:19). The leaders thought he was talking about building. Jesus was talking about his body.

This is zeal! For the worshippers at the temple, for Israel's spiritual leaders, for you and me and all people, Jesus took charge. He became the sacrifice that God demands from us. He paid in full, not just the temple tax, but the wages of all our sins, even our sin of failing to make this news the focus of our lives. The cost to Jesus was the torment of hell. He suffered and suffered until God's wrath was satisfied and sin's curse was broken. This is why he wants us to focus on him. He wants us to know that he's taken care of our biggest problem – our sin. God no longer holds anything against us. Jesus' resurrection proves it. This is our sign that all is well between God and us. For if there were still some sin unpunished, still some of God's wrath remaining, Jesus, the sinner's Substitute, would still be languishing in hell. But he's not. He lives and so do we at peace with our God through faith in Jesus.

Does the sin in us and in the world around us still cause trouble and heartache? You know it does, but our risen Savior says: **"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."** (John 16:33). Because Jesus is our peace with God, troubles and problems don't need to worry or distract us. The one who died for us now lives for us. He knows our troubles better than we do. Better yet, he knows how to use them to keep us focused on him, to keep us trusting in him till until our dying day. This is our hope. It's a sure thing because the one who loves us is faithful and in charge.

I told you about some of my favorite pictures of Jesus. I think I can guess what yours might be. It's the one in which he welcomes you into heaven, his arms are wrapped around you, and his warm embrace says it all! You are loved, you are safe, because you are his...forever. Amen.