

“Raise Up!”

A sermon in the Lenten series

“Listen Up!”—Following Jesus More Closely”

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March 19, 2017—Third Sunday in Lent

- John 2:13-22 ¹⁸ Then the Jewish leaders asked him, “By what authority are you doing these things? What miraculous sign will you show us?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered, “Destroy this temple and in three days I’ll raise it up.” ²⁰ The Jewish leaders replied, “It took forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?” ²¹ But the temple Jesus was talking about was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. (Common English Bible)
- Isaiah 1:10b-12, 16-17 Listen to what the LORD is saying to you. Pay attention to what our God is teaching you. ¹¹ He says, “Do you think I want all these sacrifices you keep offering to me? I have had more than enough of the sheep you burn as sacrifices and of the fat of your fine animals. I am tired of the blood of bulls and sheep and goats. ¹² Who asked you to bring me all this when you come to worship me? Who asked you to do all this tramping around in my Temple? ...¹⁶ Wash yourselves clean. Stop all this evil that I see you doing. Yes, stop doing evil ¹⁷ and learn to do right. See that justice is done — help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights, and defend widows.” (Good News translation)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Our trust in God who raised Jesus from death to life *raises up our* ability to know God and love God and obey God and serve God.

Know what I learned this week? Foreigners who visit the United States love going to Niagara Falls. A school principal who for years has been involved in student exchanges with schools in Spain and Germany and South Africa and China said that when foreign school groups have the chance to tour the United States, they want to go to New York City, Washington, D.C.,... and Niagara Falls of all places! Who knew?!

I’ve been to Niagara Falls three times, most recently just a few summers ago while on our church’s youth mission trip. Both the American and Canadian side of the Falls provide great experiences of that natural wonder. But especially on the Canadian side, the area near the Falls is filled with cheesy tourist attractions that try hard to pry Canadian dollars out of your wallet. You can choose among Screamers House of Horrors, Ripley’s Believe It or Not!, the Upside-Down House, an Imax Theatre, Fallsview Water Park, Castle Dracula’s Wax Museum, House of Frankenstein, Mystic Maze of Mirrors, Criminals’ Hall of Fame, plus go-carts, miniature golf, escape rooms (which sound like a terrifying variation on the traditional fun house), tattoo parlors, souvenir shops, every franchise restaurant imaginable.

Kids especially are drawn toward all those tourist attractions. On a family trip to the Falls when our boys were little I remember taking them to a breakfast restaurant whose building was shaped like a flying saucer. The sign promised that their pancakes were “out of this world.” They weren’t but their campy theme sure was.

But the shops and eateries and museums and all the rest of those tourist attractions serve as *distractions* from the aquatic wonder which is the reason for visiting in the first place. For a few minutes hold onto that image of the crass, commercial, touristy part of Niagara Falls, Ontario.

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The Bible doesn’t tell us much at all about the childhood of Jesus. We hear about his birth, of course. Forty days later he was presented in the Jerusalem Temple as part of the new mother’s purification ritual. When Jesus was twelve years old Luke tells of one family trip joining other Nazarenes in making a Passover pilgrimage so they could offer sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem. On that trip

Jesus got separated from his parents in the big city, and it took days for Mary and Joseph to locate him... in the Temple, of course, talking with the priests and teachers.

This morning's gospel reading tells of an event that also occurred in the Jerusalem Temple, but this time with Jesus as an adult. This incident is usually described as "Jesus cleansing the Temple," though it didn't actually happen *in* the Temple.

The Temple had been built on top of Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. The pointy top of a mountain is a tough place to build, so ancient engineers had designed a series of retaining walls on the mountaintop. The walls enabled them to construct an expansive flat area to "cap" the mountain. Even today, when iconic photographs of Jerusalem depict the gold-domed Muslim shrine, you're seeing that large flat area created by the artificial capping of Mount Moriah. Although the ancient Jerusalem Temple was destroyed in the year 70 A.D., the expansive grounds that surrounded it still exist.

In today's gospel reading it was those grounds surrounding the ancient Jerusalem Temple that were bustling on that day when Jesus, now an adult, entered the area. What he saw was a crowd of Jewish pilgrims – sincere believers – arriving from near and far to offer sacrifices and pray in the presence of the Temple. What he also saw was what amounted to a "farmer's market" taking over the bulk of the Temple grounds. There were booths and stalls selling animals for ritual sacrifice which arriving pilgrims could purchase right there, saving them the inconvenience of having to make the trip bringing along the sacrificial doves or lambs or sheep or bulls.

Jesus also saw that money-changers had set up their currency exchange benches (it's from the Latin word for "bench" that we get the English word "bank"). Here's what was going on. Regular money wasn't allowed to be used in the vicinity of the Jewish Temple – apparently secular money was too "worldly." So arriving pilgrims had to exchange their hometown money for special Temple money in order to buy sacrificial animals from the pens set up on Temple grounds.

Apparently it was standard practice for both the animal merchants and the money-changers to take advantage of the pilgrims by jacking up their prices and exchange rates. Maybe the unfairness of that is what "flipped the switch" for Jesus on this occasion.

When Jesus had visited the Temple as a child, the sights and sounds (not to mention the smells) of the animals, and the banter of the merchants and money-changers, and the press of the crowds of pilgrims most likely were fascinating and exciting for him. Probably he had never before seen so many people in one place! Maybe as a child Jesus experienced the Temple something akin to the way a child today would experience all of those gaudy side attractions at Niagara Falls I described earlier – fun, exciting, not like anything back home. But the museums and gift shops and thrill rides of Niagara Falls can prevent one from appreciating the majesty of that natural wonder of the world.

And now as an adult experiencing the Temple and its grounds, what impressed Jesus the most was how the "business" in the Temple was actually more of an obstacle because it distracted believers from their reason for being there. It's not included in the fourth gospel's telling of this story, but Matthew, Mark and Luke report that Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah in exclaiming, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer...'¹ but you have made it a den of robbers."²

Through the centuries, artists rendering this biblical story of "the cleansing of the Temple" have depicted Jesus "trashing" the joint: tearing down awnings, pulling down tent poles, kicking over benches. I think it's unlikely that he did widespread damage – the Roman soldiers patrolling the area would have quelled that real fast. Still, Jesus' actions made a statement about familiar religious traditions that can get in the way of people actually *experiencing* God. But it was a message that the religious officials didn't understand. So they asked Jesus, "Why do you think you can disrupt the way we've always done things? Show us a sign that proves you have the right even to question our tradition."

He responded, "Destroy this temple and in three days I'll raise it up."³

They knew that no one could reconstruct that massive, majestic building in three days. But as John's gospel observes, Jesus was speaking metaphorically. Later his disciples would recall that and

¹ Isaiah 56:7

² Mark 11:17, cf. Matthew 21:13, Luke 19:46

³ John 2:19-21 Common English Bible

realize he was referring to his resurrection from earthly death to eternal life. (Then again, Jesus *is* God, the Son of the Heavenly Father. Why *couldn't* he raise up a demolished building in three days... or even in an instant?)

When Jesus was raised up from the grave he inaugurated a new era when the complacent, complicit traditions of old were set aside to be replaced by something new. Jesus and the religious leaders all would have known well God's complaint expressed by the prophet Isaiah:

Listen to what the LORD is saying to you. Pay attention to what our God is teaching you. ¹¹ He says, "Do you think I want all these sacrifices you keep offering to me? I have had more than enough of the sheep you burn as sacrifices and of the fat of your fine animals. I am tired of the blood of bulls and sheep and goats. ¹² Who asked you to bring me all this when you come to worship me? Who asked you to do all this tramping around in my Temple? ¹³ It's useless to bring your offerings. I am disgusted with the smell of the incense you burn."⁴

Later Isaiah goes on to record what God desires instead: "Wash yourselves clean. ...Yes, learn to do right. See that justice is done – help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights, and defend widows."⁵

The prophet Micah would echo that desire in words you are more familiar with:

⁶ What shall I bring to the Lord, the God of heaven, when I come to worship him? Shall I bring the best calves to burn as offerings to him? ⁷ Will the Lord be pleased if I bring him thousands of sheep or endless streams of olive oil? Shall I offer him my first-born child to pay for my sins? ⁸ No, the Lord has told us what is good. What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God.

So... what does the Lord require? What does God want from us? Jesus invites us to *raise up* our level of devotion to God. Jesus urges that we *raise up* our vision of what God wants of us – in today's vernacular we might be told "step up your game."

His resurrection *raises up* a unique new connection for us, a new connection between God and God's people: through Jesus the Son we have a ready and intimate connection with God the Heavenly Father. Jesus brings us directly to the Heavenly Father without primitive rituals of animal sacrifice, of burnt flesh and pungent smoke. Jesus the Son brings us to God through God's act of undeserved grace inviting us to know God and love God and obey God and serve God.

Jesus urges us to *raise up* our awareness of God's activity in our own lives. Without a conscious awareness that God is involved in our world and our lives, life can be uncomfortable, even scary. It can feel like we're living in an empty echo chamber, alone, cut off, abandoned, with no one to call on when life overwhelms.

Jesus invites us to *raise up* our gratitude for the blessing of God's grace. It's through the undeserved gift of grace that God guides and comforts and encourages and protects us on our walk through this life.

Jesus prompts us to *raise up* our appreciation for how God enriches our lives through the people in our lives: through our friends and our family, through neighbors and acquaintances, through mentors and classmates and co-workers. Jesus prompts us to *raise up* our appreciation for the blessing of others we may not give a lot of thought to, such as the guy who fixes your car and the gal who waits on you at lunch, the plow crews who clear the roads and the firefighters who are always at-the-ready just in case.

During Lent this year we're striving to "Listen Up" in order to discover how we can follow the example of Jesus more closely. In today's episode we see that Jesus sought to cleanse the Temple of practices that created obstacles to religious observance, practices that created distractions to faithful devotion. Instead, he simply invites sincere trust – faith inspired by God's presence and engagement with the world. Our trust in God who raised Jesus from death to life *raises up our* ability to know God and love God and obey God and serve God.

Let us pray. *Trustworthy God, may your power to raise up your son from death to life move us to raise up our willingness to entrust our lives to your plan. Amen.*

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⁴ Isaiah 1:10-13 Good News translation

⁵ Isaiah 1:16-17 (excerpts) Good News translation