

“Mad Jesus”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
April 2, 2006
Scripture: John 2:13-22

Before there was a church,
Before the resurrection,
Before the crucifixion,
Before Jesus had done any teaching,
Before he had collected a full complement of disciples,
Before he had done any miracles, well, except that time he turned water into wine at a wedding,
Before all these things,
Once - Jesus got very angry.

Jesus went up to Jerusalem at Passover time and went into the temple the gospel reading says.

In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 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. He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here!”¹

Jesus – mad. Furious. In a rage and not about to internalize his anger. Each of the gospels tells this story – sometimes called “the cleansing of the temple,” and for each gospel it has a central significance in the plot. It was a pivotal event for Jesus and for those who would follow him, as well as for those who would oppose him. This was the moment of conflict. The other three gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke) insist that the event happened on the Monday after Palm Sunday and led directly and promptly to Jesus’ arrest and death. But here in the gospel of John it happens near the very beginning. Before major teachings, healings, signs and miracles, before the disciples have banded together, Jesus enters the temple and is mad.

We get angry people here in church. I would venture to say that some of us today might be mad. Angry about our jobs. Angry about something someone said to you. Angry about changes happening that are outside your control. Angry about a medical diagnosis. Angry about a war and a situation seemingly spinning out of control. There is a lot to be angry about. I would guess that it would not take too much probing to find out most everyone of us is mad about something important in our lives right now.

But every once in a while, someone who is really angry comes into church. In one of my first weeks here as a pastor, someone came into the church after worship and shouted out that he was declaring war on the Presbyterian Church. It happens sometimes during worship – someone, perhaps dealing with some mental illness issues stands up and argues back to the preacher right

in the middle of the sermon. And only the soothing words of the ushers who rush to attention can get everything settled back down and orderly. Our church doors are open to all who come, and some of those people who enter are angry.

Imagine with me for a minute. It is Passover – the high holy days in the capital city. Everyone has come to town. Jerusalem’s population of forty thousand or so inhabitants swelled with maybe an additional two hundred thousand pilgrims.² It is like the state basketball and hockey and wrestling tournaments have all been scheduled for the same few days at the Excel Center and everyone is in town and everyone is wearing their colors, declaring their allegiances. Teenagers are walking around with their low-slung pants and cell phones and parents are circling the one-way streets trying to nose their minivans into that one available parking space. Oh and that same weekend people decide to launch massive protests and counter-protests over every conceivable issue from a newly enacted smoking ban to gay marriage to immigration proposals. You get the feel for the intensity and chaos in a few block area. It is all happening at the same time. That is what it was like in Jerusalem at Passover. But add in imperial troops, revolutionary resistance, and a local government assumed to be puppets of the distant Empire.

Jerusalem at Passover. And attendance at the temple is a must. So the staff had been working extra hard that week. Bulletins to prepare. Additional volunteers to recruit. Rookie ushers had to be trained in. Someone had to check – is the sign updated, how about the website? Who would water the Easter flowers? Oops – you know what I mean. It was a big event. Everyone wanted everything to be perfect – a meaningful spiritual holy week, you know. With great music and preaching and everyone in their finest dress.

And suddenly Jesus enters the temple. Now the temple was not just a big sanctuary with quiet organ prelude music. It was always pretty chaotic, but especially so on high holy days. Pilgrims had to exchange Roman money into Jewish money to pay the temple tax so money-changing tables were needed. Merchants were needed to supply votive offerings, incense, cloth, and vessels and basins for cooking and sacrifice.³ Worshippers came needing the right quantity of unblemished sacrificial offerings, so it was much easier to buy the offerings of grain, small animals like doves, and larger animals like sheep and cattle near the temple thereby avoiding the risk of having the animals damaged in route.⁴ Highly-trained butchers were available to turn the animals into sacrifices. On a day like this the temple was smelly, and loud with different dialects mingling together and people trying to be heard.

Then Jesus enters the temple. Mad as a hatter, or mad as a righteous prophet, depending upon your perspective. Everything was thrown upside down and topsy turvy. He pours out the coins collected and overturned their tables. And he took some cords, and made a whip, and drove them, all of them – people, sheep, doves, cattle – with his whip he drove them out of the temple. “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” Jesus screams over the bedlam.

Don’t dismiss this as a temper tantrum on Jesus’ part. And this is not a matter of Jesus against Judaism. It is not just a matter of Jesus mad about the sacrifice of animals as part of worship – much as vegetarians like myself wish that to be the case. It is not about Jesus against

the priesthood, or against the temple. It goes much deeper than that. This story has often been misinterpreted to support anti-Semitic claims.⁵

We are thinking people here at Central, so don't buy into those false and harmful oversimplifications. Let's try to figure out what Jesus why Jesus was so angry. Remember that Jesus was a Jew. And as a Jew, he had a passionate concern for what loyalty to the God of Judaism required.⁶ Remember that Jerusalem was an occupied city. History is a helpful tool for our understanding. Roughly ninety years before Jesus died, the Roman Empire invaded and overthrew the Jewish monarchy. Initially Rome ruled through the high priest, the temple, and a local wealthy aristocracy, appointing local collaborators to rule on Rome's behalf. As long as they were loyal to Rome, sent in the hefty tax money, and maintained order, Rome was happy. But then power struggles consumed the local aristocratic families, and Rome appointed a strong man to rule – Herod. After Herod the Great died, his much weaker sons ruled ineffectively, so Rome appointed governors based in Jerusalem.⁷ Remember the bad guys from the gospel – Herod sending the wise men to find out about Jesus' birth and then slaughtering the innocents? Governor Pontius Pilate questioning Jesus before his death?

With these new appointed governors, Rome decided that the temple in Jerusalem would serve as their new center of rule. The temple was now at the center of local collaboration with Rome.⁸ So now the temple authorities had the responsibility for collecting and paying the annual tribute due to Rome in addition to collecting tithes. And get this, records of debt were stored in the temple. The high priest and temple authorities were in a tough spot – stuck between a rock and a hard place. They had to make sure Rome was paid and happy. They also had to maintain domestic peace and order. They had to keep Rome happy enough without provoking their Jewish subjects to too much anger. Meanwhile the policies of Rome kept demanding more and more money, and the people went deeper and deeper into debt, and the temple was where all these tensions led.

And Jesus walks into the temple. His conflict is not just with the priests. He is angry not just about the animal sacrifice. He is not mad just over the money changers. His protest was against a whole system of domination legitimated in the name of the God of the temple. His protest was against this kingdom of domination that was radically different from the kingdom of God that Jesus said was already present and coming.⁹

Quoting prophets and mad as can be, Jesus created a scene right there in the temple. Overthrowing the money tables, driving them all out with his whip and his righteous anger. How dare the temple be used not as a sacred place but a place of oppression and domination. How dare the temple be misused. How dare the people he loved be treated as pawns in a kingdom based on the fear and powergames of the Empire rather than treated as dignified participants in the kingdom of God known for its love and justice and truth.

One day, Jesus walked into the temple and was mad. John tips us off by placing this story in chapter two of the gospel that this conflict would dominate the gospel story. This conflict between the kingdom of God announced by Jesus and the kingdom of the Roman Emperor who was thought to be a God. This conflict between love and power. This conflict between the way of the cross and the way of the Empire that says individuals can't make a

difference so it is better to execute one to make an example and restore order. The Empire would strike back, of course. The Roman rulers and the local collaborators could not allow someone like Jesus to just walk in and turn everything upside down. The plotting to get him had begun before the last coin hit the ground. I think Jesus knew that, even as he walked through the temple doors. There would be a cost to his actions. There would be a cost to his holy anger.

Lent is a season to recommit ourselves as disciples of Jesus, the One who came proclaiming that the kingdom of God had drawn near. It is a time to remember the full range of his teachings and actions. His compassion for those who needed healing. His teachings that continue to inspire and amaze us. His meals that brought together tax collectors and sinners of all kinds. His anger one day in the temple. This is the One we follow and this is the One who points us to the love and passion of God.

The season of Lent is a time to pray that when the going gets tough, we will follow Jesus. This season of Lent is a time to promise again, with boldness and open eyes about where he may lead, that we do want Jesus to walk with us.

We talked about feelings during the Children's Time today. Don't let any bright yellow Easter decorations and frilly bunnies fool you – there are things that still make God angry in this world. Injustice, aching poverty, discrimination and systematic oppression. God is still angry, and we should be to. And there are still things that make God weep in this world. We can commit to doing things about them. We will, together. But when God weeps, sometimes the first thing we can do in response is weep ourselves.¹⁰

¹ John 2:14-16

² Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006) 18.

³ E.P. Sanders, Judaism: Practice & Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International) 85.

⁴ Sanders, 86.

⁵ Borg and Crossan, 34-36.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 12 – 15.

⁸ Ibid., 15

⁹ Ibid., 30.

¹⁰ The conclusion of this sermon lead directly into the hymn "God Weeps."