

**Mar. 3 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent Year A 2024 Sermon**

Several years ago a friend of mine and I had tickets to the St. John's Passion performance at the Carmel Bach Festival. The rest of California was experiencing a terrific heat wave, and there was a "hot" Covid climate with a high case count. Carmel however was shrouded in a deep and lonely fog. My friend and I went back and forth on whether we should go. We were both vaccinated. Andrew who is younger than me said. "If you are going to die you must hear St. John's passion before you do". I had listened to Bach's St. Matthew Passion many times. It is stately beautiful, and mathematically profound in its sound structure. But that did not and could not prepare me for what I heard that day. We came to a town basically deserted with all but a handful of restaurants closed. The streets quiet. Fully masked we heard the pre-concert lecture on the cold concrete outdoor stage. We then entered the hall fully masked.

From the first chord this was not like St. Matthew measured and pure. It was a sound that became a luminous lighting followed by a rolling thunder in my soul. I was transported challenged and enthralled. Bach had captured the mystery and uniqueness of John's gospel with such power that I was overcome.

Indeed the cleansing of the Temple appears in all four gospels but John's narrative is uniquely challenging, alien, and raw. In John Jesus makes a (small whip) out of cords, which are actually the husks from what the animals in the temple ate. No weapons were allowed in the Temple courts so this is more authentic than the other gospels in which he uses a stick, which would have been prohibited. The text in John is vivid, almost frightfully so. You can hear the chaos and crowding, you smell the animals and you see what Jesus sees, the money changers "just sitting there" with a predatory perspective. You can hear the copper coins being spilled out by Jesus onto the floor from the tables of the moneychangers. Jesus does not call them thieves in John like in the other gospels he states clearly that they are doing business in a sacred precinct, His fathers house and the gods of commercialism are not welcome in the house of God. Jesus in John passage singles out the sellers of pigeons after driving out the oxen and sheep. The pigeons were the animals that were provided for poor folks, like Mary the mother of Jesus when they needed to make an offering because it was all they could afford. So the issue could have been not that anyone was cheated but that the poor who could least afford animals suffered the most.

The story in John takes a strange interpretive twist and becomes a foreshadowing of events to come. Jesus said “Do not make my Father’s house a house of merchandise” in other places the charge against Jesus was that he claimed God as his Father, so making him equal with God. Here his enemies come from a different angle. They ask “What sign can you do to prove your authority for this act” Jesus answered destroy (loose, unbind or dissolve) this Temple I will raise it up again in three days. This was a brilliant answer he did not say “I will destroy”, he said “you destroy and I will raise it up”.

At this point the narrative drops us back and says, “He spoke of his body, and when he was raised from the dead the disciples remembered this and believed the scriptures.”

So Jesus is now the Holy of Holies, he is the center of all things. He is as Johann Sebastian Bach writes, the “Joy of our desire” He is at the center of ethics, religion, faith and the mysteries of heaven. If we behold him we can never turn away, if we hear him we can never forget what he said and if we experience his love we can only stare at the light from from heaven while our hearts beat in time with the rolling thunder of God’s grace. Amen.