

Reimagining God

Sermon by Pastor Patrick Fish

March 3-4, 2018

Lent 3

John 2:13-22

*Grace and peace to you from Christ, where God abides.
Who is the sacrificial lamb for all people. Period. Amen.*

Move 1: My brother challenges the norm

My brother, Joe, was never a guy who liked to be put in a box. He liked to be his own person, and he walked to the beat of his own drum.

So, my family are all White Sox fans. But my brother decided no one would pigeonhole him, so he was Cubs fan. I wore Jordans and Nikes; Joe wore cowboy boots for a good portion of his childhood. Joe didn't like to be told he had to wear certain clothes depending on certain occasions, so, for everything, he wore sweatpants and/or basketball shorts. I liked baseball caps; Joe regularly wore a fedora.

Imagine that look going to preschool! Actually, he looked good.

Every year at our preschool, we had career week. Parents would come in and talk about what they did for a living. And at the end of the week, the kids would share what they wanted to be when they were older.

Now, since I'm the older brother, I had been through this before Joe. During career week, when it came time for me to share what I wanted to be, I said I wanted to be the next Michael Jordan. Realistic, I know. Came so close! If coach just would have put me in fourth quarter, I know we would have won state, and I'd be this generation's MJ.

Anyway, my parents were expecting my brother to have similar aspirations. Oh, but they forgot Joe's spirit.

Picture yourself as a parent. The kids in class are all sharing what they want to be. "I want to be a doctor." "I want to be a football player." "I want to be a police officer." "I want to be a teacher." All wonderful and meaningful careers God works in and through.

Then, they get to Joe. And Joe runs up and without any hesitation and says, "Yeah, I either want to be a crossing guard, cotton-candy vendor, or lion tamer."

Super specific career choices. Totally my brother.

I loved that spirit about my brother. Still do. Joe was Joe. And he wasn't going to let adults, peers, or systems tell him how he should or shouldn't be. He was always willing to challenge expectations. Never willing to let people tell him how he should or shouldn't act.

Well, in today's Gospel, we have Jesus acting sort of like a lion tamer. Jesus makes a literal whip and whips animals out of the Temple. Jesus is flipping tables. Yelling at people for their actions in the Temple.

This doesn't fit our normal expectations of Jesus.

This is a Jesus I'm uncomfortable with. This is a Jesus we didn't talk about in Sunday School.

Growing up, I was taught that Jesus was always gentle. He was kind. He was inviting. He was loving. He was my friend.

So, what do we do with this dramatic interaction of Jesus in the Temple? How do we make sense of Jesus being angry?

I'd rather avoid this scene altogether. Count it as an outlier. Chalk it up to Jesus just having a bad day. Forgot to get his beauty sleep the night before.

But, the truth is, we as Christians aren't called to just the easy and fun stuff. We are called to the tough stuff, too. Christian life is about walking with people in the best of times. Laughing with them. But it also entails walking with people in the worst of times. Crying with them.

We can't avoid the tough stuff. Thus, we can't avoid this interaction. This scene. This agitator Jesus either.

Move 2: Jesus the agitator

Images matter. How we imagine God matters. And I believe how we image God impacts how we see the world. Our image of God impacts also how we interact in the world. On a daily basis.

This is why arts are so important, why music is so important. They give expression to the incredible nature of God.

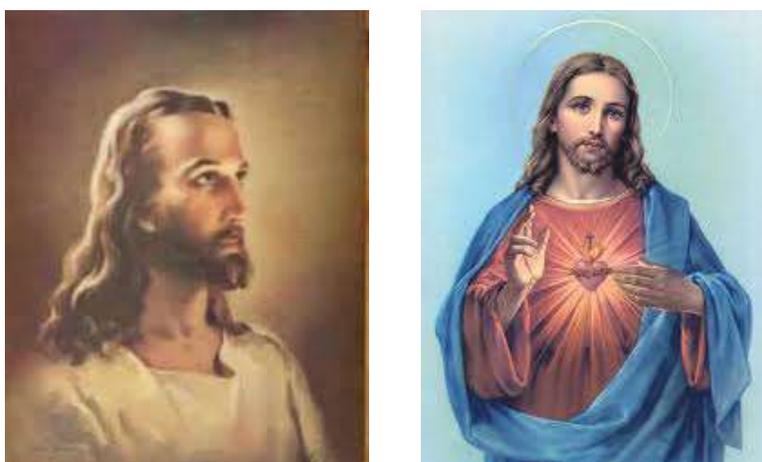
If we think God is law-driven, then we tend to focus on human morality and behavior. But, if we think God is more gospel-driven, we move to an entirely different focus.

If we only think of Jesus in one way—as the guy who held and kissed babies, who prayed on the mountainside, who was gentle and kind—then, we miss out on who Jesus was.

Yes, Jesus was the lamb. But Jesus was also a lion. Who spoke truth to power. Who overturned the entire world. Who crossed boundaries. Who fought hate with love.

Who tore down walls and wasn't afraid to break up centuries of traditions if it meant opening people to the God who sent his only son to be the savior of the whole world. Not just the chosen few or worthy few, but all people.

When we talk about Jesus, these are the images that often come to mind:



These are most common photos that I see hanging in church basements and education wings.

You can imagine my surprise when I went to seminary and took an historical Jesus course where I was presented with this picture :



Based on science, anthropology, and archaeology, this is the best guess as to what Jesus looked like.

Jesus was Middle-Eastern, a peasant, a short man, of the Jewish faith. This is most likely what he looked like.

When the professor put that image up on the screen, I didn't believe him at first because it didn't match the image I had of Jesus in my head. I had to reconstruct who Jesus was. And I began to realize that Jesus was more than a reflection of myself in the mirror.

Who Jesus was for me was no longer meant that he was like me, or that he was white.

Jesus is different from me. From us. He is the Son of Man. He was flesh and bone. But Jesus is also the Son of God. Who was able to uphold the law, unlike us. Who obeyed God's will fully. And who fulfilled what none of us could do. To die so that all of us, despite our differences, could receive both the forgiveness of sin and eternal life.

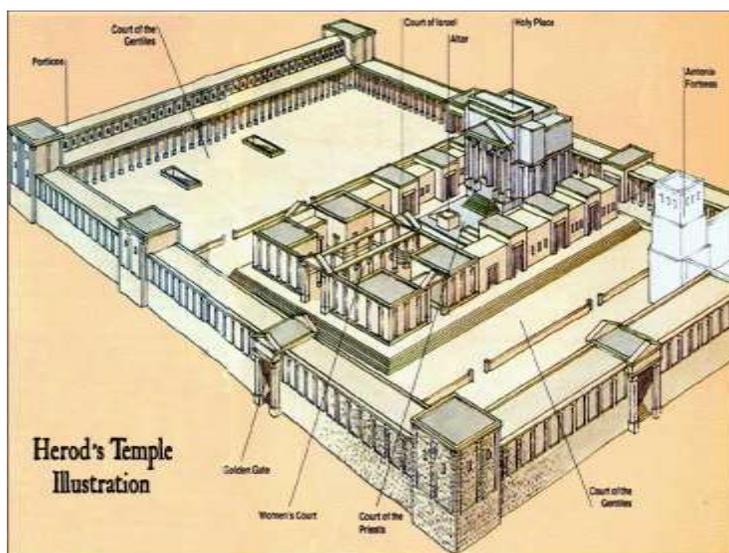
Our images help us get at Jesus. But they can also put Jesus into a rigid box. This Lent, I'm hoping we can begin to peel back our images and biases of who Jesus is. When we are open to thinking about Jesus in new ways--not just as a nice white guy—then I think we are ready to tackle together the concept of Jesus whipping animals and flipping tables.

So, then, when we see images like this, we can sit in it. Dig in and discern together what is Jesus trying to reveal about God here:



What does Jesus' anger...Jesus' actions here of whipping animals and flipping tables....Jesus being an agitator ...what are they pointing to about God? And what do they teach us about how we live as followers of Jesus?

Move 3: God is doing a whole new thing



In today's Gospel reading, we hear that Jesus arrives at the Temple in Jerusalem during the Jewish Passover. Passover is the time that people of the Jewish faith celebrate the moment when God rescued them from Egypt. And, at that time, the Temple was the center of religious life. The place would have been *hopping*.

People from all across the world, from every region and country, would have been traveling to Jerusalem. Jews and Gentiles alike. To be at the Temple. It would have been wall to wall people in that Temple.

Now, the idea of a marketplace, animals, and money changers in the Temple make little sense if we don't know a little history. We can't fathom having something like that in our churches today, but, back then, it was customary and followed years of tradition.

Back then, people offered animals to the priests to atone for their sins. That's how forgiveness was thought to be achieved, by sacrificing animals before the altar. As was written in the Torah and law,

You thought I did goofy things at church! I just make you watch gorilla videos. That's nothing.

Well, if you were traveling from a completely different country, you would buy an animal at the Temple to offer as a sacrifice. But, to do so, you would need to exchange your money for the money being used in Jerusalem.

Imagine buying something in Canada or Mexico. To buy an item, you need the correct currency. To do so, you would trade your U.S. currency for the Canadian or Mexican currency.

In Jerusalem, instead of going offsite to exchange currency to buy an animal, the Temple leaders had it all in the courtyard. One-stop shop, if you will. Good idea. Saves time. Convenient.

So, then, why does Jesus get so angry?

Well, for one thing, there was an incredible amount of corruption and cheating going on. To get sins forgiven, people were told they had to offer an animal to be sacrificed. But the individuals doing the money exchanging and the individuals selling animals would cheat people. Make them pay way too much. The exchange rate was ridiculous. It benefited the rich but hurt the poor. It hurt those who were seeking forgiveness and newness but found only religious leaders and the system preying on them.

This doesn't sit well with Jesus. So, Jesus kicks them out. Cleans house.

The other thing that I think angers Jesus is the separation of people that was occurring in the Temple at that time. Gentiles were not permitted anywhere but the courtyard. They couldn't step foot into the inner Temple. They were seen as lesser. Treated as lesser.

Jesus sees the corruption. Sees the excluding of people. And he says, "Enough!"

God is doing a whole new thing. No longer is the center of religious life going to be found in a flawed, human institution. In a *place*. From now on, our center is found in a *person*. More specifically, found in the person of *Jesus*.

When Jesus says in John 2, verse 19, that he is going to tear down the temple and in three days raise it up, Jesus is not talking about the physical building of the Temple. He is talking about his own body.

Jesus' anger is tied to where God abides. Jesus' anger is tied to who God includes.

And Jesus makes it very clear. Crystal clear. That Jesus has come for all people. Gentile and Jew. Saint and sinner.

No longer do we need to offer animals before the priests and altar. Jesus, the lion, reveals that he will be the sacrificial lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

Move 4: The Gospel is dangerous

This is powerful. This is good news. This the Jesus we need.

We often picture and image Jesus as this “nice guy.” That’s why it’s so important we get these other glimpses of Jesus that open us to the fact that Jesus is bigger and beyond anything we could ever image.

Walter Brueggemann argues, “We forget the Gospel is a very dangerous idea. We have to see how much of that dangerous idea we can perform in our own lives. There is nothing safe about the Gospel. Jesus did not get crucified because he was a nice man.”
(Walter Brueggemann, *Clergy Coaching Network*)

Jesus is the lamb. But, Jesus is also the lion. Jesus wasn’t just a nice guy who healed people. Jesus agitated the entire social, political, economic system. He flipped our entire world upside down.

One image, one metaphor can never capture the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and what he means for us.

We always have to be willing to look at God in new ways. That’s why Scripture is so important. That’s why discerning and interpreting together in community is so important. It’s how the Spirit opens us up. Expands our faith. Helps us grow.

When we open ourselves up to Jesus as an agitator, we further ourselves to embrace the vastness and wideness of God’s love, grace, and forgiveness.

Move 5: “Dead Poet’s Society”

To close, I want to do an activity.

How many of you have seen *Dead Poet’s Society*?

Well, there’s a scene in the movie that I love. The teacher, Mr. Keating, stands up on his desk and asks the class. “Why? Why do I stand on the top of my desk?”

The kids shake their heads and start laughing. Mr. Keating then goes on to say:

I stand upon my desk to remind myself that we must constantly look at things in a different way. You see the world looks very different from up here. Just when you think you may know something, you must look at it in a different way. Even if it may seem silly or wrong, you must try.

During Lent, we allow ourselves to be open. To open our hearts. To open our ears. To open our eyes again to see the new ways in which God is active and alive in the world.

To illustrate this, I’d like each of you now to stand up.

And I'd like you to move to another area of the sanctuary. You can stand up on the pew. You can sit in another pew. You can come up here to the altar. You can go to the back by the baptismal font. Find a place where you can see the cross. The table. The church in a new way.

Ready? Go!

* * * * *

Friends, my hope is we are never done learning. Never done growing. That this season of Lent, and every season of Lent, we are open to who God is, where God is, and what God is up to in our lives.

Amen.

Resources:

Walter Brueggemann, *Clergy Coaching Network*

Copyright © 2018, Patrick J. Fish