

“ Crashing the Temple ”

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Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 2.13-25

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When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. 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. To those who sold doves he said, *‘Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!’* His disciples remembered that it is written: *‘Passion for your house has consumed me.’*

The Jewish leaders then responded to him, *‘What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?’*

Jesus answered them, *‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days.’*

They replied, *‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?’* But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and trusted in his name. But Jesus would not trust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need anyone to give him information about people, for he knew what was in each person.

John 2.13-25

Adapted from the New International Version

In the beginning, when all was shapeless and empty, and darkness hid the depths, God created . . . a temple.

A temple is a tangible expression of the divine purpose, a sanctuary of praise and offerings, a centre-point for gathering and relationship between the worshippers and the one worshipped.

When God created the heavens and the earth, God fashioned them as a Temple. The Bible’s first creation account, stretched over seven days, follows ancient patterns of temple-building. The cosmic creation is God’s Temple. It pulses with God’s glorious

presence. It is a theatre of praise and offering.¹

Temples need priests. Priests represent the divinity to the worshippers and the worshippers to the divine. So God made priests. In the image of God, God made them. Male and female, God made them. God made you. You, and me, and all of us are God's priesthood. We represent God in the creation, and represent creation before God. God fashioned you to tend God's creation, to order and bless it. God filled you with gifts of creativity and ingenuity, passion and compassion. Companions together, we form culture and sing poetry, invent and discover, all for God's glory, priests in God's world.

But we priests – all of us – defile the Temple. With our violence, our corruption, our depravity, our destruction.

God sees.

God gave us up to the consequences, banished us, and all creation groans and mourns.

Still, God is good and faithful.

II

So God made a new priesthood. From among us all, God created and called them to represent humanity before God, and God before humanity. Starting small, God named them Israel. God set them to work on a Temple. At first, it was a portable tent, a tabernacle. Later, it was a wonder of wood, stone and gold. This Temple was the whole cosmos in miniature, like it pulsing with God's glorious presence, like it a theatre of praise and offering. Like the Creation itself, this Temple is both dangerously holy and wonderfully hopeful. A light on a hill, shining into the darkness. A beacon for us all.

God set apart Israel to steward this mystery and wonder, this meeting house between God and God's People, this treasury of grace and monument to majesty.

But, since they were called from among us all, these priests too defiled the Temple. Lies. Thievery. Murder. Adultery. Hucksters of holiness, swindlers of sanctity.² Like us.

God sees.

So God crashed the Temple down, and sent the people away, mourning in lowly exile.

Still, God is good and faithful.

¹ See John H. Walton, The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate (Grand Rapids: Intervarsity, 2009), especially 71-91. Also, William P. Brown, The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 33-77.

² See Jeremiah 7.8-11.

III

So Jesus walked into the Temple.³

It had been destroyed almost six centuries earlier. Eventually, though, Israel had come home from exile and started restoring it. After fits and starts, the latest project had been underway for a generation. Work was still being done. Nonetheless, it was already an architectural wonder, surpassing the old one. Surely God would be grateful.

As Jesus walked in, it was, as usual, far from a quiet centre of contemplation. Its courts were hectic with chaos. Animals were being bartered, the latest models for the best sacrifices. Money was being changed. (You see, most people carried the common coin of the empire, and it was embossed with Caesar's image. But that's a blasphemy, not suitable for an offering to God. So folks were there to helpfully exchange those bad coins for official temple ones, with, of course, a fee tacked on for their service.)

Jesus looked at it all. Then, he shut it all down.

No doubt within a short while everything was humming along again. What Jesus did was send a message. An announcement about what he is about. Jesus walked into the Temple and pretty much set the national flag on fire. Without the animals, there could be no sacrifices. Without the money, no offerings.

His problem was not just that the Temple had become a shopping mall.⁴ The whole thing, the whole system, was a mess.

God sees.

So Jesus claimed authority over it. A sermon with a whip.⁵ He might as well have nailed a "Condemned!" sign on the door.

³ A conundrum of this episode is the question of when it happened. The Gospel of John places it near the beginning of Jesus' work. However, the other biblical gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) locate it close to the end, making it a key trigger for the brutal crackdown that leads to Jesus' execution. One explanation is that similar episodes happened twice, but this is a stretch. I believe Jesus' Temple-action occurred once, in the week before his crucifixion. John's relocating of it was an intentional decision, which serves at least three purposes. It casts us immediately into the conflict between Jesus and the religious-political authorities. It hints at the coming climax of Jesus' glorification, his execution and resurrection. It also reveals to us more about Jesus' authority and identity. Just as Jesus' first sign at the wedding at Cana did, this episode gives us a lens through which to view what follows. For a discussion of these issues, see Bruner 149ff.

⁴ Here I disagree with Bruner (143). It wasn't simply a case of a sacred space being invaded by profane commerce. The problem was the Temple system itself.

⁵ Dale Bruner titles his chapter on this passage, "Jesus' Whip Sermon." The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 142.

Still, remember. God is good, and faithful.

IV

You really can't blame the bigwigs for being put out. *"Jesus! Who do you think you are? You are a nobody from nowhere! What credentials can you possibly have to back up what you are doing? Prove yourself!"*

Jesus says, *"Tear this whole thing down. In three days, I will put it back up!"*

You really can't blame them for assuming he was talking about their Temple. That was, after all, the topic of conversation. They think Jesus is boasting he can rebuild the stone Temple in three days, and they are incredulous at his audacity. Imagine if they knew what he was really talking about.

Himself. God's Temple.

Go back to the beginning. The whole cosmos is God's Temple. Creation pulses with God's glorious presence. But we priests, created to care for it, instead defile it by how we are with each other, with other parts of creation, and with our Creator. The Temple crashes down.

Yet because God is faithful, God raises up from among us Israel. Its Temple is the whole cosmos in miniature, a sanctuary for relationship with God. But God's People desecrate it. It crashes down.

Yet because God is faithful, now from within Israel comes Jesus. The Cosmos' Creator has entered into the creation. The One who made all things has himself "templed" among us.⁶

Jesus is God's presence with us. When he acts, God is acting. When he laughs, it is God's delight. When he weeps, it is God's sorrow. When you listen to him, you are hearing God. When he forgives you, he is God setting you free. When he summons, he is God calling you. When you are following, you are following God. When he says, "Come to me with your weariness and burdens," he is God welcoming you. When he says, "abide in me," he is God inviting you to live in his presence.

Everything the Temple is, everything the Cosmos is, Jesus is.

⁶ In John 1:14, it says the Word became flesh and set up his "tent" among us. The Greek word for "tent" is *skēnos*, which is the same word used for "tabernacle" in the Greek translation of Exodus.

V

But they came crashing down.

So will Jesus.

“Destroy this temple,” Jesus says, and he is talking about himself. *“Destroy this temple.”*

They do. The priests do. All of us priests do. It’s what we do. It’s what we’ve done.

His first disciples remembered a Scripture. It is from a psalm.⁷

*“Fire for your house [God’s Temple] will consume me.”*⁸

Or we could put it,

*“Zeal for God’s Temple has eaten me up.”*⁹

Or this way:

*“Passion for your house has torn me to pieces.”*¹⁰

Tear him down. That’s what we do. He puts himself in that place, because that’s who he is. God, who is passionate for the cosmos-creation. God, on fire for what and who God has made. Including priests, like them and you and me.

All the crashing down, will come crashing down on him. All the crashing you’ve done and that’s been done to you, all the crashing we’ve all been part of together, he will crash onto himself.

And then, he will raise it all up. Himself. His People. His Israel. His whole Creation.

All will be all in all. All will be all in Jesus. All will pulse with God’s presence. All will be a theatre of praise and offering. All will be in relationship with the One we worship, relationship intimate and personal, whole and holy.

⁷ Psalm 69.9.

⁸ The Greek word translated as “zeal” (*zēlos*) means fire.

⁹ “Has eaten me up” is from N. T. Wright’s translation in John for Everyone, Part 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 23.

¹⁰ Bruner, 144.