

God's Self-Revelation In Vulnerability – Judy Cox

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

“Welcome to St. Paul’s this third Sunday in Lent” we’ve heard this morning—this third Sunday in Lent of Year B, also known as the Year of Mark. The three year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary has each year centering on one of the Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) with John read a little every year, especially around Christmas, Lent, and Easter. Okay, I get that. But WHY does the lectionary move us to the Gospel-according-to-John for THIS passage? Do you, too, maybe feel a little yanked around? I thought Mark included a perfectly good presentation of the cleansing of the Temple!

Well, yes! Perfectly good, but also different—and differences can enlighten! In the Synoptics this incident happens in the last week of Jesus’ life. There, as the last straw to his furious opponents, it brings on his death almost immediately. John, for its stated purpose of bringing faith, has even less interest in historical timetables than do the Synoptics; this gospel’s structure itself, along with much else, emphasizes Jesus’ divinity—otherwise known as John’s “high Christology.” The cleansing of the Temple opens and frames Jesus’ ministry in this gospel, along with the water-into-wine wedding miracle in Cana. Placed side by side, both with a reference to *signs that reveal his glory* and bring belief, they reveal Jesus’ divine identity. That is the core of the difference. John presents the cleansing of the Temple to reveal, uniquely, WHO JESUS IS.

All our texts today talk about revelation, the self-revelation of God. They summarize for us the movement, all across Scripture, of God coming closer, closer, closer to us, revealing God’s self more and more fully.

In the first half of our psalm, creation reveals and praises God; God’s self-revelation begins with creation itself. The “indirect” revelation of God in the “Book of Nature” stands alongside the “direct” revelation in the “Book of Scripture,” both books bearing witness to Who God is. The opening chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans reiterates this understanding: *Ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature ... have been understood and seen through the things God has made.* And we see, from the beginning of the Scripture story, God coming close to God’s good creation, seeking out relationship with us the created.

Both the Exodus reading and the second half of our psalm speak of God’s gift to Israel of God’s self-disclosure in Torah, the Law (or “direction,” or “teaching”). As Walter Brueggemann observes regarding Exodus 20, this is not “a series of rules but ... a proclamation in God’s own mouth of Who God is and how God shall be ‘practiced’ by this community ...” God continues to seek relationship, and so gives clarity as to just how God’s people can flourish in all relationships, with God and with others.

Exodus continues with God’s making provision for the tabernacle (later replaced by the Temple)--in incredible detail. Here God would make God’s own self accessible to Israel. In Exodus 25:22: *There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you ...* Exodus 40 recounts the completion of the tabernacle: *then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle*; likewise, at the completion of the Temple which replaced it, in 1 Kings 8: *...a cloud filled the house of the LORD ... the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.* What gift! Here heaven and earth would intersect, between the wings of the cherubim over the ark in the Most Holy Place; God’s own presence would reside with the people of Israel!

So, with that backdrop, let’s turn back to our Gospel reading! Sorry if this feels like more yanking around!

John aims to show us Jesus as the fullest, most complete, most adequate revelation of God, for John emphasizes, beginning to end, that Jesus IS God. And John's details of this Temple-cleansing incident, not just his timeframe, deserve our attention.

Please notice that in the Synoptics, Jesus quotes Isaiah 56 and Jeremiah 7 about a *house of prayer* and a *den of robbers*; to John that's not nearly as important as the disciples' remembering, in an "Aha" moment later, this passage from Psalm 69. *Zeal for your house will consume me* ... and then everything makes sense in a new way for them.

The Jewish leaders understand his words and actions as a radical claim, with his command to *Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!* They don't accept that claim. Skeptically they ask for a sign, a proof that he is indeed Messiah.

Now don't both that challenge and Jesus' reply sound a little different? *Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up ... speaking of the temple of his body.* In himself Jesus claims to replace and so make obsolete both the Temple and the Temple system. The passage just preceding this relates the wedding in Cana, where Jesus also replaces something of the Jewish religious system, the water for *Jewish rites of purification*—with the best of wines. (Are you hearing echoes?—the wine being offered by him as “the blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many”?) But here Jesus speaks of his replacing the Temple with his own body.

Okay, Jesus' reply doesn't compute for the challengers in that setting; that's typical of this gospel according to John! Although in Jesus' vindicating resurrection in three days the Jewish leaders will receive their requested sign, they still will not accept it.

We, the current audience, do a little better at understanding, just as in retrospect the disciples do. We've heard the Prologue to John's gospel; we know that God the Son, the enfleshed eternal Word, is Jesus the Christ. *The Word became flesh and lived* [literally, “tabernacled”!] *among us, and we have seen his glory!* THIS is John's message, and he repeats it in every way he can: in Jesus, God is incarnate—Jesus is God, loose in the world!

I've always read the quote from Psalm 69 to say that in his concern for his Father's house Jesus is zealously defending God's honor, bearing reproach, shame and insult for God's sake—and that zeal will cause his death. But N.T. Wright helps me, too, make sense of it in a new way. What if we are to understand this on several levels? Consider this: might zeal for God's “house” (think Temple) equate with zeal for God's presence with and accessibility to humanity? Is it in the Incarnation first, not the crucifixion alone, that zeal for God's presence with humanity consumes and swallows up the Word, the Second Person of the Trinity? The Incarnate Word BECOMES that presence with us! God has come closer and closer and closer to us across Scripture—this is the ultimate closeness, accessibility and presence with us, God “swallowed up” by—in—our physicality and mortality.

And consider this implication as well: the Word Incarnate, Jesus as Emmanuel, the Temple, God's presence with us ... anticipates and accepts destruction. Jesus accepts human violence not with retaliation, but with concern for others, and forgiveness.

Wait, wait, you say! What about that whip John shows in Jesus' hand? Isn't that human violence? Good question! In fact, a preacher friend once shared, with dismay, that following his teaching on this passage a parishioner marched out, saying, “If Jesus can use a whip, then so can I!” But let me say, it's pretty clear that Jesus cobbles together a whip on the spot, out of cords or ropes made from rushes—not the soldiers' whip of leather, metal and bone designed to rip flesh. For another, read more closely: the wording shows that he uses the whip on animals rather than people. Jesus energized and angry?—yes. “Jesus Mean & Wild” certainly, disrupting business-as-usual and shooing animals with a rope; Jesus assaulting people, no!

Let's look at our Epistle text for more on this vulnerability that Jesus displays in accepting the destruction of his body. What is Jesus revealing about Who God is? As verses 23 and 24 declare, *Christ crucified*—Christ vulnerable, Christ not retaliating—*is the power of God and the wisdom of God*. As Paul observes, it's foolishness to any in the world's systems, whether educated elites or proof-seeking legalists, to choose vulnerability and weakness! If we are honest, we admit that it is foolishness to us. Ian Markham, Dean of Virginia Theological Seminary, says it this way: *God's definitive disclosure of what God is like is in powerlessness. The Creator of the universe, whom we understandably associate with power ..., reveals God's true nature by becoming weak and vulnerable.*

So we really do want to affirm that *God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength*—that God does most fully reveal God's self in Jesus Christ the Crucified One. We do receive with thanksgiving his Body and Blood broken and shed for us, given in the vulnerability and power and wisdom of God. At the Table we ask “to live and grow in [Jesus'] likeness.” This Lent we pray together after receiving: “by your Spirit may the mind be in us which was in Christ Jesus, that we may go into the world in your strength, giving ourselves for others, in his name.” And we confess that we really don't know what we are asking. Lord, have mercy!