

For This: He Came to Clear the Way *John 2:13-22*

Introduction

Back in 1984, the Ohio Division of Travel and Tourism created a new slogan for our state. You have no doubt heard it many times.

Ohio, The Heart of It All

When the office rolled out this new slogan, they identified two key reasons they thought this was a winner.

1. First, the state of Ohio is roughly shaped like a heart. Maybe a heart drawn by a pre-schooler, but if look closely, you will probably see it.
2. The second reason is that there are a lot of things to see and do here in the Buckeye State.

In the years since, they have attempted to replace that slogan with a few others, but “the heart of it all” always keeps coming back. The other ones just haven’t caught on. The current one on the “Welcome to Ohio” signs says “Ohio. So much to discover.” I won’t buy that T-shirt.

I think the simple phrase “the heart of it all” captures the intent of today’s Gospel text. Now, because I want to do the preaching-in-a-series thing, I’ve titled this message:

He came to clear the way.

As you know the title’s for the previous two weeks have been:

- He came to show the way.
- He came to model the way.

And now today, “He came to clear the way.” But I could have just as easily made my title “The Heart of It All.” That’s why Jesus came. To clear the way so we could get back to the heart of it all.

It was for this purpose He came. In our text for this day, Jesus specifically came into the very center of Israel’s greatest festival. Passover was a national gathering of God’s people in the sacred city of Jerusalem, a time in which they would celebrate their deliverance from Egypt and their birth as a nation. The closest we come in this country is the 4th of July, but NOTHING any of us have ever seen or experienced comes remotely close to the festivities at a Jewish Passover in Jerusalem.

At the heart of it all (that is, at the heart of Passover) was the annual sacrifice, the spilling of blood and the offering of forgiveness, as God had commanded Moses thousands of years before. Every adult male within a 15 mile radius of Jerusalem was required by law to be there, and thousands of Jews scattered beyond that radius made incredible sacrifices to be present as well. It was the dream of every Jew to be able to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem.

Unfortunately, not all was kosher in this Jewish religious festival. Behind the scenes a very corrupt business was operating under the control of the high priest and all the religious officials of the day. Here's how it worked.

- On Passover, every Jewish male over the age of 19 had to pay an annual "Temple Tax" that amounted to two days wages.
- Regular currency was declared "unclean," so it had to be exchanged for an official Temple issued "half shekel," the amount of the tax. To make the currency exchange, you would be charged the equivalent of another day's wage. So far Passover has cost you three days' pay. And you weren't done.
- Next you had to buy your sacrifice from the temple herds. You could buy it somewhere else or bring one from home, but the inspectors probably would reject it as being blemished in some way and thus unfit for sacrifice. You were better off buying from the temple. Their sacrifices, of course, were priced way above market value. One commentator said that what would have cost \$4 outside, cost \$75 inside.

So corrupt was this system that when the Roman General Crassus raided the temple treasury in A.D. 54, he was able to carry off more than \$10 million dollars without making much of a dent in the bottom line.

All of this corruption and noise took place inside the courts of the Temple – in the very place where worship was to happen. Our text tells us that when Jesus came into that place of worship...

He found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. (John 2:14)

How could He – how could anyone – worship in the midst of all that? So incensed was He by what he observed that He created a whip and began to drive out anyone who was doing anything that didn't belong in that sacred place of worship.

"Get out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" (John 2:16)

Somewhere in their history the Jewish people had lost sight of the wonder and importance of authentic worship. They no longer valued being in the presence of God, surrounded by God's people. They had forgotten what that was like.

- In its place, all of this other stuff that Jesus found that day had crept in and taken over.
- Worse yet, the Jewish people had come to accept it as "normal."
- That included those religious leaders who should have known better, but were too busy profiting from the system.

Passover was no longer a time of thanksgiving to God for all He had done, but a chaotic combination of taxes, shekels and over-priced sheep.

Jesus came to clear the way, so that His followers could find the way back to the “heart of it all: worship.” The worship that Jesus wanted His followers to experience was:

#1: AN UNCLUTTERED WORSHIP

When the other Gospel writers tell this story, they include another statement by Jesus. In it He quotes one of the Old Testament prophets:

And He said to them, “It is written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.” (Matthew 21:13)

What Jesus expected was a house of prayer. What He found was a den of robbers. All of that clutter was robbing people of doing only thing that mattered: being in a meaningful conversation and relationship with God.

You know that I often begin our worship services by asking you to set aside all the things you have carried into the sanctuary so that you can focus entirely upon the God in whose name we have gathered.

- The rush to get here.
- The list of things you have to do when you get home.
- It is all clutter. And if you let it, it will interrupt your ability to worship.

What we should be able to see when we come into worship is God, and only God. We want to hear Him speak to us, and we want to be able to speak to Him. That’s what prayer is: being in God’s presence, hearing His voice, speaking from our hearts. God’s house is a house of prayer. Everything else is clutter.

So Jesus came to clear the way, so that His followers could come back to the “heart of it all: worship.” He came to clear the clutter, every distraction, so we focus on being in the presence of God.

Secondly, the worship that Jesus wanted His followers to experience was:

#2: AN UNHINDERED WORSHIP

Look again at verse 14:

In the temple courts (Jesus) found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. (John 2:14)

I’m trying to imagine that scene! Scholars tell us that a typical Passover event would involve several million people, all crowding into the market place and trying to get to the place of worship. What a scene!

I let my mind go to that place, and do you know what it reminded me of? Take a big risk and follow me into the mysterious caverns of my mind. You might remember a special event we used to have once a year. It was all the rage. The newspapers

covered it. The TV news did. We talked about it for weeks. We even had a special ominous name for it: "Black Friday." Remember?

- You would get your Thanksgiving Day paper – the thickest paper of the year, filled with all of the ads and one-day-only specials.
- Once your dinner was devoured and the mess cleaned up, you would spread those ads out on the table, and study them like you would study for a chemistry final in high school.
- You would set your shopping strategy. "I need to be at Toys R Us at midnight, Macy's by 4 a.m., Best Buy at 6 a.m."
- Then you would get up early and squeeze your way through the aisles, hoping to get to that one special deal before the last one was sold.

Now go with me to Jerusalem. Do you see all those faithful Jews from places far away, all who have been dreaming of the day they would be able to see the beautiful Temple in Jerusalem? They had been saving their resources for years. "Next year," they would say. "Next year we will worship in Jerusalem." And today was finally the day.

They were here, along with a million of their closest friends all squeezing through the same lines at the Temple's version of WalMart, down the sheep aisle, past the doves, past the bankers, past that woman still in her pajamas, just hoping they might finally be able to worship beside the golden lampstand and see the great curtain that hung in front of the ark of the covenant! Here they were, but they all these hindrances in the way, barriers to being in the presence.

Jesus came to remove those barriers. "Get out of here!" He tells them. He became your Passover Lamb. He paid the price, so that you and I could walk into the presence of God unhindered. There is nothing to prevent it.

That feels so easy for us that we think we've have to make it harder. We create all other kinds of barriers to keep ourselves on the outside looking in.

- What if I'm not good enough? God would never love me.
- What if God isn't really what people make Him out to be?
- How did He part the Red Sea? I'm not sure I can believe all that miracle stuff.

Jesus came to clear the way, so that His followers could come back to the "heart of it all: worship." He came to help us get past all those roadblocks to our faith... All those things that make it hard for us to be all-in for a life with God. "Get out of here" He says!

Finally the worship that Jesus wanted His followers to experience was:

#3: AN UNLIMITED WORSHIP

Listen again to verses 21-22:

But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. (John 2:21-22)

When the passage began, Jesus was filled with zeal because of what was happening within a physical building. By the time the passage ends, Jesus has turned the attention away from that physical building, and onto Himself. He was the temple. His Body would be the dwelling place of God. Not a Temple that would soon be destroyed.

The dwelling place of God used to be the Temple in Jerusalem; now it is in the Body of Christ. In us. The Church.

Now you are Christ's body, and individually parts of it. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

Collectively we are Body of Christ. God dwells in us. Don't miss that fact. As such we have unlimited access to God. We don't have to save our funds for years to make the long trek to Jerusalem. God dwells here, in us. Not in the building, but in His church. That's what God has promised, right?

For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst. (Matthew 18:20)

Jesus built His church, the most powerful and untapped force in the world. He came to clear the way so that would never know what it would be like to live apart from the presence of God. Because He came we have unlimited access.

APPLICATION

It must have been quite a scene that day in Jerusalem. I wonder what all those million people thought as Jesus cleared the way for them to worship.

I also wonder what Jesus might think as He looks into my heart as I come before Him.

- Tom, set aside those distractions
- Tom, quit putting up roadblocks
- Tom, where have you been?

Jesus came to die for our sins. We hear that a lot. But do know why He died for your sins? So that you and God could have a wonderful relationship together.

So how is your worship?

Let's pray ... Amen.