

Like most church kids growing up when I did, I once owned a WWJD bracelet. Pausing to ask *What would Jesus do?* isn't a bad approach to discernment. But someone always points out that a perfectly legitimate answer to the question *What would Jesus do?* is *make a whip and flip over tables*. True, but we might want to look a little more closely at the context before we choose *this* incident as the example of Christ-like behavior we most want to emulate.

John's story of Jesus in the temple is different than the synoptic gospels in a couple of ways. First, notice that this is only Chapter 2; this is the first of three Passover visits that Jesus makes to Jerusalem in John's gospel, so this is early in the story. Mark, Matthew, and Luke include this scene during what we think of as Holy Week—at the end of Jesus' ministry; for them, it is the final straw that angers the religious leaders enough to pursue Jesus' death. But that's not the point here: Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead gets Jesus in trouble in John's gospel. Also, in the synoptic gospels, Jesus rebukes the merchants for making the temple “a den of robbers” which would suggest that Jesus' issue is with unethical money-changers exploiting people with high exchange rates. But in John's gospel, Jesus doesn't call anyone a thief; he generally criticizes the Temple becoming a marketplace.

But the thing is, the Temple needed to be a marketplace with animals and money-changers in order to function. Roman coins stamped with a graven image of caesar and the claim that he was divine had to be exchanged for shekels before they could be offered in the temple so the Israelites didn't break the commandment against idolatry. And since animal sacrifice was part of the Law, but most people didn't raise their own livestock, animals had to be made available for sale. Still, this story does *not* show us Jesus, the Son of God, undoing God's own commands to worship through sacrifice. Jesus himself says he did not come to abolish the law, and he was worshipping at the temple at Passover because he was faithfully Jewish, as were the early generations of his disciples.

History can help us out here: Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple, speaking of his body, but by the time John's gospel was written, the actual temple building had been destroyed by Rome in the siege of Jerusalem in the year 70. John's congregation would have personally remembered, or the younger folks would have at least heard stories of, the temple's destruction. The system of animal sacrifice that only happened at the temple no longer existed by the time John wrote his gospel. Almost 2000 years later, the faithful still gather to pray at the remains of the Western wall, what had been the foundation of the temple; imagine how the people of John's day would have grieved for this place that was still part of their collective living memory. So in the aftermath of the temple's destruction, the people wouldn't have heard Jesus threatening to

do away with worship as Israel knew it; to them, this passage is Jesus' reassurance that even though they had lost their way of worship, they were *not* in fact separated from God, even though the place and practice where they used to meet God had been destroyed.

Even when the temple was the center of worship in Judea, God was never restricted to that one place. The Lord walked in the garden with Adam and Eve, visited Abraham's tent, wrestled with Jacob, called Moses from a burning bush, and led the people out of Egypt in a pillar of cloud and fire. As today's psalm tells us, *the heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky proclaims its maker's handiwork*; God is present everywhere—in tabernacles and temples, in lions' dens and fiery furnaces, in the sheer silence and still small voice. The Law, beginning with the 10 commandments that we read today from Exodus, was an invitation to the people to be in relationship not just with one another but with God—and the practice of the Law was certainly not limited to when the Israelites were in the temple.

Remember that John begins his gospel by telling us that *the Word became flesh and lived among us*. It's in John's gospel that Jesus tells the woman at the well that the time is coming when people will worship neither on the mountain in Samaria nor [at the temple] in Jerusalem. Throughout John's gospel Jesus teaches the disciples to abide or remain or believe in him—that they will know God the Father through the Son who was sent to the whole world that God so loved. Jesus didn't supersede the temple as a way to meet God any more than Jesus would deny this building as a place to meet God. Yet for people who had lost their place of worship and may have thought that God had abandoned them, Jesus promises that God is always present. Aside from any sacred *place* where we meet God, we always are invited to meet God in the way of Jesus, in the sacred space between people, loving one another as Jesus loves us.

Four years ago next week the world shut down in an effort to contain the pandemic. In the weeks and months that followed, we worshiped through the computer in living rooms and dining rooms and kitchens, in the yard outside, anywhere but this sanctuary. As difficult as it sometimes was to *feel* connected to the Divine during that time away, we were still participating in an act of worship by caring for the life and wellbeing of God's children. God meets us in temples, synagogues, mosques, and churches; but God is not bound by them—or by anything else. The people want to know how the temple that had taken 46 years to build could be destroyed and raised again in three days. In a couple months, I'll be able to say that I've been under construction for 46 years; it gives me comfort, hope, and courage to think that there's nothing that could happen to me that God can't redeem through Jesus who was even raised from death. May we all live bravely, knowing that wherever we are, God is with us.