John 2:13-22

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.14In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables.15Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables.16He told those who were selling the doves, ‘Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!’ 17His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’18The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’19Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’20The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’21But he was speaking of the temple of his body.22After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

“The Only Sign You Need Is Jesus”

As Jesus was being crucified, a question was asked to him by those who were passing by, and the Roman soldiers, and the priests and scribes, and even a criminal who was being crucified next to him: “If you are who you say you are, why don’t you save yourself?” In other words, “If you are capable of healing others, feeding others, bringing others back from the dead, why don’t you use your powers to save your skin? Not only that, but don’t you think that people would believe that you are the Son of God if you did show some sort of sign? A miracle? Show us a sign!”

This way of thinking is still prevalent today. Astrologers look to the sky for signs. Others look at cards. Others see statues that cry or bleed. We still laugh a bit nervously if we hear thunder right after we spoken ill of someone, believing that rumble is a sign that God is telling us to watch what we say. There have always been people who look for signs of God or gods around them. Then there are those who attempt to interpret those signs. But are signs God’s primary way of proving things to us? Are signs God’s way only way of communicating to us, as if there is some sort of invisible wall between Him and us and his only way to communicate to us is by turning on a light or sending a comet? I find it sad that so many people who have never read the Bible spend so much time trying to match historic events with the “signs” that are described in the book of Revelation or elsewhere in the bible in an attempt to figure out when the world will end. Is it really that hard for God to communicate to us? Or is He just playing a game with us, giving us little pieces to a puzzle and having us put it all together? If He is, I daresay that we are quite adept at connecting the wrong pieces together.

Today, in our lesson, Jesus has just entered the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, cracked a whip and driven out the venders, and now stands before the priests and elders who ask him for a sign, to explain himself. In other words, if what he’s doing is God’s will, they need to see some supernatural proof that this is God’s will. The priests and elders apparently have the same notion as astrologers or other sign-seekers; that God is a mystery and communicates through supernatural means. And I hope you see the tragic irony of this scene. Here before these men stands the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Immanuel, God with Us, and they are asking him for some sign from God. *What Jesus has just done for everyone to see is a sign from God!* In fact it is the clearest sign from God that we could ever ask for – a righteous anger over a corrupt religious practice in the very place where people come to meet God! I imagine that if my son came home from school to find a bunch of people hanging around inside the house, and if he was greeted by someone at the front door saying, “You need to pay me before you can enter the living room,” that my son would himself form a whip out of something (take off his belt?) and say, “Get out of my house!” And if someone came out of the living room and asked him, “How do we know this is *your* house,” don’t you think the fact that you are angrily driving these strangers out would be proof enough? God’s most direct way of communicating with His people has always been through the words and actions of his prophets whose words and actions reflect the will of God. Sometimes they were words of warning, sometimes of impending doom, sometimes “I told you so,” and sometimes “take heart; I coming to the rescue.” Not lightning bolts or crying statues or shooting stars. Just clear words and actions.

We don’t need to look for signs of God when we have direct access to Him through prayer and through His Word. There is nothing that can prevent you from hearing God if you want to hear Him. Find a quiet place, put your hands together, open your heart, or open the Bible. You will hear God, and you will know him. You will be amazed by him, and you will be afraid of Him, and you will be grateful to him, and you will come to love him with your entire being.

But we can never know God truly if we pick and choose what we would like him to be.

If we believe that Jesus was the incarnate Son of the living God, we see in him God’s own character, including His anger. As we read the Gospel lesson today, we imagine that we might have been frightened by Jesus had we been in the Temple that day – cracking a whip, knocking over tables, yelling at us. To be honest, this portrait of Jesus painted by all the Gospel writers didn’t fit with the image that I had created, a Jesus who was pretty cool, laid back, peaceful, gentle, the way he’s depicted in the picture with the lamb around his shoulders, and the little children running up to him. The Happy Jesus, like the picture in the back of the sanctuary. Or the calm, cool, collected Jesus, like the one in the picture in the fellowship hall. Certainly there were times when Jesus was joyful, happy, probably even playful. But that’s not the entire picture. There were times when he looked around at everyone in anger, when he said, “how long must I put up with you, you faithless and adulterous generation?” He had some pretty choice words for the Pharisees, calling them “whitewashed tombs” and “serpents” and “children of hell.” If we are to be Christ-like, we need to consider all of his behavior and not ignore those incidents that don’t seem to match our preferences. And we know, if we are truthful to ourselves, that Jesus is not always directing his anger away from us. He spoke harsh words to Peter (“Get behind me, Satan.”), to the church, and he can speak harshly to you and me.

And we can be thankful that Christ speaks harshly to us, as he did to his disciples and churches and the Pharisees. It shows us that Jesus refuses to give up on us. Martin Luther prays, “Lord, punish me, but do not be silent.” Jesus has the love of a drill sergeant, who shouts to his troops, “I’m not leaving you until you get this right.” He stays right with me as I fail over and over and over again, until finally I get it right. He doesn’t tell me to quit, or settle for anything less than what he knows I am capable of. He never gives up on me. As one writer puts it, **“Christ would have lost my soul if he had not refused to compromise with me.”** He wants to perfect us, and he doesn’t give up. We need to rejoice over the fact that Jesus believes that we can do amazing things, and he doesn’t give up on us until amazing things actually happen.

Jesus’ harshness tells me that we too need to be harsh at times. All parents know this. Aren’t we the hardest on our own children? Why? *Because they are the ones we care about the most!* We find out that our own child was among a bunch of boys who stole candy from a store and we march him to that store and we make him apologize to the owner and make him sweep the sidewalk in front of the store for a month, because we want to teach our son a lesson that he will never forget. The closer we are to someone, the more care we take in guiding, directing, and disciplining that person. Jesus was harsh to many people because he had great expectations of many people and he wanted to affect positive change in those people. A lack of indignation at wickedness betrays an attitude of indifference and tolerance of injustice betrays a nature that is a polar opposite of Jesus.

Of course the greatest sign that Jesus is who he says he is comes with the resurrection. Jesus says, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” What greater proof does one need that Jesus is Lord than the fact that “this temple,” this embodiment of God the Father, cannot and will not be kept down. Even the greatest monuments that humanity can construct, temples and cathedrals that take thousands of people hundreds of years to construct can be brought down in minutes. But the body that God has created and blessed cannot be destroyed. This is our faith. This is why we are here today and every Sunday as we celebrate.