

Temple Tantrum  
John 2.13-22  
March 4, 2018  
Lent 3B  
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What's your guiding story? What's the story you tell yourself about the meaning of your life? the meaning of all life? the leading force of the universe? Chances are, you have more than one. There's the story we inherit from our families of origin—this could be instructions for always being generous and kind, practicing a radical hospitality or it could be a robust anxiety about the dangers of the world and paranoia for what our neighbors think of us. One of our guiding stories starts in that first home.

We hope, at our best, that what we're doing here is telling a guiding story about who God is and how we are to be in this world if we are people born of God's imagination. And just like those families or origin, we all come from a bunch of different forming churches that have told us how this guiding story of faith is supposed to go. And just like the guiding stories we inherit from family, sometimes the stories we tell ourselves need to be edited and revised. In the family story, we do that with the help of great friends and a really good therapist. We decide what to keep and celebrate, what to grieve and release, and in our adulthoods we (hopefully!) are becoming better storytellers of our lives.

In church, we need to edit and revise, too. That's a big part of why we value asking questions here as a key part of our identity. We know that often we are walking the doors of this place with guiding stories of faith and scripture that have some bruises, some really rough edges, and some false narratives. Now, I won't ask for a show of hands, but I suspect there are more than a few of you who discovered over the years that your family repeatedly told a story that wasn't true. And maybe even a couple of generations protected that family secret until finally it came out in a found letter, a deathbed confession, a distant relative who had some other piece of information. Initially, there can be real trauma around discovering the truth of that secret, then there's likely either distance and denial (I don't want to hear this. I don't want to know anymore.) or there's curiosity and fact-finding (I don't want to hear anymore lies. I want to hear the truth. All of it. Now.) And maybe, when this process plays out really well, at the end of the fact-finding is some peace, maybe some reconciliation, and hopefully, a lot of laughter.

This gospel lesson today is about guiding stories and what happens when an entire group of people build a framework around a story that has lost the plot. It would be arrogant of me to assume that all of the details of their faith, practice, and worship were wrong. In fact, I don't even think that's what Jesus is saying here. But he is exposing some family secrets head-on and criticizing (if you can call making a whip and using it to drive out the money changers, their animals, flipping tables and dumping out their literal blood money a critique) their guiding story.

I had a plan for Lent that went off the rails when I also ended up with a mild concussion, so I'll compress it into a 90-second version instead. For the first three Sundays of Lent, we were to going to explore Covenant stories. The readings for these Sundays included God's covenant with Noah and a show of regret on God's part for sending a destructive flood to cover the earth.

God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: <sup>13</sup>I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth...When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth."<sup>1</sup>

The next week moves to God's covenant with Abram who God renames Abraham, and the covenant will also extend across generations and includes even the poorest among them who are servants and not land-owners. And the Exodus reading set aside for today begins with God reminding Moses and the children of Israel of their guiding story, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me."<sup>2</sup> And then God lays out a framework for what life together must look like if people are going to remember their covenant with God, honor what they see of God in one another, and work together to make a community of peace and justice.

To my mind, there is an expansion happening here as these stories build, and maybe it helps to even tack on Genesis 1-2 at the beginning to better help us see how things expand pretty rapidly. It starts with God saying, "I created you." Then expands to, "I love you and will protect you and the earth for generations. I will remember." Then broadens again with a promise to not just make many generations from one man but to honor all kinds of people who neighboring religious traditions are ignoring. (And this is not nearly radical enough for us in the 21st century but was certainly a radical

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 9.12-16

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 20.2-3

statement for millennia ago.) And then expands again today with framework for what it looks like for people to live in love and peace with their neighbors. So the guiding story of faith Jesus inherited was one of the ever-expanding love of God, a love rooted in relationship with God's people, a love that learns and grows and can even be shaped by God's people, a love that requires God's people live in particular ways with one another to honor what is very good not just in oneself but in one's neighbor. This is part of the guiding story of Jesus' life.

And we get to the scene with a hand-fashioned whip, and we know something has gone wrong. Pastor Jacqui Lewis calls this Jesus' temple tantrum. He's done. He's over it. He cannot abide that in the temple one can hear these stories of expanding love and covenant but then witness injustice, greed, and preference for wealthy men. He cannot abide that in the temple one can memorize God's words of affection, provision, and compassion and then walk away without any call to live out those same qualities in real and concrete ways. Tear it down to the ground, and Jesus will raise a new temple. It's angry. It's passionate. It's shocking. We absolutely must allow Jesus' words in that temple to be words to us today, too. This is not about "those bad guys back then" and us wise ones today. This is about the human capacity to close our eyes and ears to the guiding story of God.

The way of God's love is ever-growing, ever-widening, ever-deepening. This is the apostle Paul's prayer to the Ephesians, "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."<sup>3</sup> But we humans edit the story and make it smaller. We shrink down the love of God and make it just for us. We shrink down the covenant of God and make it for only people who show up and practice faith in certain ways. We sanctify practices in our faith that really aren't of value at all. We call neutrality and politeness sacred and call a prophetic tantrum in the temple bad manners. We miss the plot, too. We get the guiding story all jumbled up and wrong, too.

This is our work, here. We are editing and revising our guiding story to make sure it lines up with the story of God. Are the words that build our framework here the same as the sacred words we are reading, preaching, and writing on our hearts. If our love is smaller than God's, we commit ourselves to growing love. If our welcome of neighbor and stranger is smaller than God's, we commit ourselves to expanding welcome. If our worship and practice and gathering here does not honor the peace and justice we know to be true of God, then we have to flip our own tables. If we don't have some

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<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 3.18-19

burning righteous anger in us that reflects the real passion of Jesus in this story, then we need to tap into some table flipping prophetic anger. Flipping our own tables might mean something as simple as editing and deleting programs and practices within this community, it might mean evaluating and reconsidering denominational partnerships that we find do not honor the love and welcome and peace and justice of God, or flipping our own tables might mean reclaiming the good news of God as we experience it through scripture and theology and then using that as a lens to question everything.

We begin this work at the table set before us. A table reminding us of Jesus' command to love so well that we are known as followers of the Jesus Way because of our capacity to love. A table that reminds us that telling truth to power is antithetical to holding neutral politeness, and telling truth to power is very much part of the Jesus path. A table that reminds us that the love of God is wide and long and high and deep. A table that reminds us God is not limited to the confines of this space or of our own expectations. A table that reminds us that God's love has its fingerprints all over the universe: in a rainbow across the sky by day, in the stars across the heavens by night, in the sweetness of honey, in the simplicity of bread, in the richness of wine. This table is strong and upright, it is longer than what we see, it curves and expands, it has room for all. This is God's table, and you are welcome here.