

Relocation

“What sign can you show us for doing this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

I suspect I’m not the only one who has indulged in a little daydreaming about where I might go when it’s possible to do some post-COVID traveling again. One of the things at the top of my list is the Frick Collection in New York City. The Collection and the opulent home that houses it are the bequest of Henry Clay Frick, robber baron industrialist and philanthropist, and spending time there is a truly special experience. It is relatively small as museums go, and unique in that many of the works of art there have been part of a *home*; Henry Clay Frick chose them and lived surrounded by them until his death in 1919. Visitors to the Frick view the paintings just as he did every day.

As you may have seen in the New York Times last month, the next two years will bring big changes to the Frick. The museum is about to undergo a major renovation, and a small core of the Collection is going to leave home for the first time to take up temporary residence a few blocks away. The setting could not be more different from the Beaux-Arts architecture and décor of Henry Clay Frick’s home. The new building is an imposing modern concrete edifice. So instead of being nestled together amidst the rich fabrics and furnishings of a palatial residence, the Frick’s paintings will be spaced farther apart, hung on simple gray walls beneath concrete coffered ceilings. Visitors will be able to see the works up close and unmediated-- invited into a different perspective on the artists’ creativity, inspiration, and vision. They’ll be invited to see each work in a new way. For some folks this is an exciting prospect. For others, this trip out of their comfort zone may be disconcerting.

To see in a new way. A different perspective. Unmediated.

Jesus invited his hearers to see him—to see *God*-- in a new way. But not everyone was ready to see it.

Just as we may not initially be ready to see that today’s Gospel story isn’t *just* about Jesus overturning tables and driving moneychangers from the Temple.

This is an episode that appears in each of the canonical Gospels, which tells us that it is theologically significant. All four evangelists felt that the cleansing of the Temple by Jesus revealed something about the prophetic dimension of his identity; his anger a vivid reminder of the prophets of old who chastised God’s people for forgetting who and whose they were. The three synoptic Gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke, have placed this episode—appropriately for Lent-- at

the end of Jesus' ministry—after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The timing places him in direct confrontation with Temple authorities and firmly on the road to Golgotha.

But John the Evangelist has done something different. He has offered us a new perspective. Today's story is found, not at the end, but at the *beginning* of Jesus' ministry, right after the miracle of turning water into wine at Cana. It's as though this episode has been taken out of its customary home and relocated to new quarters, forcing us to see it in different lighting. What can we see here that we couldn't see before?

It's all in the signs. John's Gospel is all about them. While the other evangelists wrote often of Jesus' miraculous healings, exorcisms and deeds of power, it was John who specifically referred to *signs*. Signs aren't significant (pardon the pun) in themselves. They cannot be separated from their function, which is to point or direct. John's signs point and direct us to Jesus' true and full identity as the Holy One of God, the Word made flesh. John's signs are a revelation of the Divine now resident in a new light, in human form among us.

John's emphasis on signs was so pointed that biblical scholars refer to the Book of Signs within his Gospel; certain revelatory events, like Jesus walking on water and the wedding at Cana, that pointed to the Divine. In these and other encounters John consistently noted peoples' lack of understanding of what was being revealed. They would see the amazing things that Jesus did, but they lacked the imagination to see in them the light of the Divine at work in the world. Jesus walked on water and the disciples thought it was a ghost. Jesus changed water into wine and the steward thought the bridegroom had held back the good stuff. Jesus told Nicodemus he must be born again, and Nicodemus wondered how he could return to his mother's womb. And so on. Jesus grieved the blindness of those who lacked the imagination to see the deeper truth and reality of the Dream of God unfolding unmediated right before their eyes.

And so it is in the Temple. As Jesus pours out the moneychangers' coins and tosses their tables John paraphrases the prophet Zechariah—"...stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" The fuller context of this is telling: the prophet has written, "There shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts *on that day*." Zechariah was referring to the day when the Lord returns to Jerusalem and the Temple. John wanted his readers to understand that Jesus' presence in the Temple was a sign of Jesus' identity as Messiah.

For those with knowledge of the Scriptures, as the early readers of this Gospel were, the Evangelist was not subtle.

It was all about the signs.

“What sign can you show us for doing this?” *Who are you, Jesus?*

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” *I am the one you have been waiting for, though not what you expect.*

“This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” *Jesus, you’re out of your mind.*

They don’t see it. They don’t see God in their midst. They see Jesus standing *within* the Temple, but they don’t have the imagination to see Jesus from another perspective—unmediated—*as* the Temple itself. God is no longer within the sumptuous edifice. God’s new home is human--among us, inviting us to follow the signs and transform our imagination—to see the world and God in a new way.

What does that mean for us under the Lenten gaze of this COVID year? We are called to disciplines of prayer and repentance, to confront and be confronted by those things within and around us that hinder a deeper connection with God, Creation and one another. In Lent Jesus enters the comfortable temples of our lives and sets about disrupting things—questioning our assumptions and expectations and calling us to look critically at the light and shadow of our lives. Jesus challenges us to *see him*—to see him as the Word, the Truth, the Christ that he truly is, and in that light to look critically at where we are, who we are, who we are becoming, and how that relates to who God calls us to be. What are the opportunities and challenges that will meet us if we accept Jesus’ invitation to come out of our cozy nicely furnished boxes--to see things as they are and not as we wish them to be? What will our ministry, our church, our community look like if we relocate our priorities to align with God’s call to heal the world?

Many questions. For those with ears to hear, and eyes to see.



El Greco, Purification of the Temple—The Frick Collection