

## **“A Moment of Reckoning”**

Rev. David Gregory

March 7, 2021

Lent 3



*The Merchants Chased From the Temple*  
James Tissot

### **Readings**

John 2:13-16

from the New Revised Standard Version

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making 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. He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

From *Jesus and the Disinherited*

by Howard Thurman

The masses of men live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. What does our religion say to them? The issue is not what it counsels them to do for others whose need may be greater, but what religion offers to meet their own needs. The search for an answer to this question is perhaps the most important religious quest of modern life.

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As our season continues to lengthen, and as our light keeps growing, in the middle of our journey toward the brightness of resurrection, there comes a refreshing moment of honesty. It isn’t that what we’ve done thus far is in any way dishonest; it’s just that if we fail in life to include a fairly candid pause once in a while, we risk becoming lopsided, ignoring things that might be uncomfortable, but that are wholly necessary for our growth in wisdom. We need these moments of reckoning. We should take a look at some harsh realities once in awhile, not cowering under them until we’re defeated, but giving them enough welcome to develop our muscles of persistence, of commitment and tenacity.

The march to Jerusalem for the disciples is one of triumph. They are confident that this teacher they have loved and followed and listened to embodies their messianic hopes for a new kind of future. Like any oppressed people, their backs are against the wall, and when Jesus speaks of a coming righteous kingdom, let's just say it's a platform that they can fully support. For Jesus, though, this is a very different journey. It's a journey toward crucifixion—something he's been telling them privately for some time, though they have predictably refused to hear it. What would trigger the Romans to execute this young healer and rabbi? We are about to find out.

By the way, we should note that the gospel of John does not follow the narrative timeline of the other three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which are known as the synoptics. Nor do the synoptics always agree on the order of things. It's a fruitless exercise to try and harmonize the story into a single one. What is important to know is that when Jesus upended the tables of the vendors, it is one of the few episodes to show up in all four of the gospels, and this lends to its importance as a core piece of the story that we follow this time of year. In my opinion, it's never gotten enough play, and I think it's because it makes us uncomfortable.

Nothing in the law prohibited the selling of sacrificial animals in the temple's outer court, known as the Court of the Gentiles. It seems as though what happened that day was nothing short of a provocation, an act of sedition, and if that is how it was intended, it certainly seemed to work. The people were so dumbfounded by the experience that Jesus and his followers walked calmly out of the temple and then outside of the city. Ensuing events are the stuff of Holy Week, which we will get to later.

I'm reading this story differently from before. Words like "insurgency," "insurrection," "sedition," and "treason" all hold a different tone for us in the wake of events in our nation's capital earlier this year. With an understanding of our nation's Constitution and what it seeks to preserve in terms of human and civil rights, attempts to overthrow it by violent means are easily recognized. This is an attack against a free society and its lawfully elected leaders. In the case of the Roman Empire, however, most people in Palestine did not live freely, but under the ever-increasing weight of authoritarian rule, as did the American colonists under the British Crown. So when we look at Jesus or even our founding fathers as insurgents, they appear as sympathetic figures, and even those of us who live in a place of societal privilege can agree that such authoritarianism is contrary to human and divine nature. And this is exactly why the framers of our Constitution felt so strongly about the free exercise of religion, later known as the "separation of church and state." The priestly class at the time of Jesus was in many ways complicit with Roman rule, and so to challenge the religious hierarchy was seen also as a crime against the empire.

This act of insurgency by Jesus of Nazareth and his subsequent execution is much more difficult to look at than the feeding of the multitudes in the hills of Galilee or the calming of the storm. All of those stories point to the constructive quality of what he was trying to do in terms of feeding, healing, and instilling confidence in a God of Love. But in today's terms we would call those things expressions of activism aimed at poverty, a lack of health care, or an absence of equal justice under the law. We weren't living in the first century. Our images are from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, experiences of world wars, depressions, pandemics, and terrorism. Our perception of the first century seems rosier, but that's only because there were no smartphone cameras to capture it.

We come by our rose-colored glasses honestly. We've been gradually conditioned to an updated union of church and state, a new expression of an old empire that seeks to crush those who are different, those who are other, and those who we are told do not belong here. In our lifetimes, there has been a deliberate push to marry the Constitution with a version of white Anglo Christianity that leaves all others with their backs against the wall, struggling to find their place in a free society, disadvantaged, disenfranchised, and robbed of their own dignity. It is a marriage that can only be described as toxic and dysfunctional, but as long as it reaches its intended objective it will never end. If this makes you a little angry, then I'm with you.

I'd rather not talk about any of this. I like talking about divine love and nature's beauty, but the truth is we live in troubled times, and the reason we are here is to build a different energy. It starts with our reckoning. Ours need not be as dramatic or place us in an epicenter of conflict. Let's face it, we're not Jesus. But we are facing ever-evolving forms of empire, where people with all the choices (those with privilege) exercise undue power over those with fewer choices (those without privilege). Self-evident facts are routinely rejected in favor of baseless conspiracies, and the health and safety of ourselves and our families are threatened by constant attacks on science.

If this makes you angry, that's OK. Anger is not a good thing or a bad thing. It's simply an emotional response to something that's happening within us or around us. We can take that anger and use it for beneficial or detrimental ends—an idea that shaped the life and work of Martin Luther King. And Dr. King took his cues from people like Howard Thurman and Gandhi. These people and many others walked a path of liberation for those who struggle between non-violent social change and violent social upheaval. And there would be no struggle in a world where there truly is liberty and justice for all.

Let's keep our selves grounded in body and earth. Let's breathe our way through justifiable anger and find a beneficial way to allow its energy to move us in peaceful, deliberate ways. We may not need to clear a temple court, but there's no doubt something we could say, there are causes we could support, and there is work we could do for the love of self and neighbor. Let us reflect in this lengthening light and see the world around us as it truly is.

