

A House of Prayer for All Nations, April 4, 2004

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Isaiah 56:1-8; 1 Peter 2:4-12; Mark 11:1-19

Intro:

There is on Palm Sunday the warmth and sweetness of early spring, a promise of new life and a sense of hope that belies what is coming. In less than a week, the mood of the city will change: the crowds of worshipers will give way to a bloodthirsty mob, and this one they hail as Savior will be crucified as a common criminal. Jesus knew all that when he entered the city. All the way up to Jerusalem he tried to prepare his disciples for what was coming, but they refused to listen, refused to believe that things could possibly go any other way than according to their hopes and dreams. They were so much like you and me. But it was in order to die that Jesus entered the city. Indeed, it was for this death that he had lived his life, and now would offer that life as a perfect sacrifice in place of ours. "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

But he had other business in the city before giving himself up for us: he had a passion for his Father's house, a passion for that place where God wanted, not only Israel, but all the nations to be free to gather and meet with him, to hear his Word taught and to worship him in spirit and truth. In Jesus was perfectly fulfilled the prophet's words, "Zeal for your house consumes me."

He wants that same zeal to consume us today. He want us to be as passionate as he was in our desire that our house of worship be a place where his name is exalted, his Word proclaimed and people of all nations, all races and levels of society, know that they will be welcomed to worship him in spirit and truth. Would those who know us best think to describe us in this way, as those who so love God's house and so long for people to know him, that we are consumed with zeal for his house? What does that even mean? How would it be seen? What would be its practical effects?

In order to make sense of this text and to understand its relevance, we must look more closely at what was happening in God's house in Jerusalem that caused Jesus' zeal to burst

out in what might appear to us as an unseemly, violent bit of behavior. Then, we need to recognize where God's house is today, and how this text should mark our lives.

Body:

1. What caused the crisis in God's house that first Palm Sunday?

The Temple was the house of God, the place where the people of the old covenant met with the living God and experienced his grace and forgiveness. The Temple served several needs within the house of Israel: it was a place to worship God, a place to learn his Word, a place to minister to the needs of the poor and broken through the giving of alms, and a place of mission to the nations.

In Jesus' day, the Temple had become the biggest business in Jerusalem. The priests did a lucrative business selling space in the Temple precincts to the merchants who had made the priestly caste of Sadducees rich and powerful. As a result, worship had become for most a matter of ritual and form, of buying the right animal and offering it at the right

time, while saying the correct prayers. The heart worship that the Lord desires was in thin supply.

In addition, the center of mission activity, the Court of the Gentiles — where people from the nations who desired to know the God of Israel were to learn to worship and serve the living God — had been leased to the merchants who sold animals for sacrifice.

2. How did Jesus response to the crisis?

He cleansed the Temple of all that would defile and distract from the mission of God's people. He did not make any effort to be nice or polite. His passion was for his Father's glory and for the nations who did not yet know his Father, but who were supposed to learn of him by going up to Jerusalem and worshiping at the Temple. Now those Gentiles were locked out, and God's people were busy buying and selling, without a passion to know God and to make him known to the nations.

3. Is there a similar crisis in our day?

In order to answer that we must first ask whether or not there is any place comparable to the Temple, where people are to worship God and make him known. Peter in his first letter describes us, the people of God, as God's house, each of us being used as building blocks fitted together to make what he calls "a spiritual house" where we will offer "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).

Paul makes this same point in his first letter to the church in Corinth, using the language of the temple and applying it in two senses: individually and communally. As individuals who have been saved by God's grace, we ourselves are God's temple (1 Cor 6). And as a congregation of believers, we are a corporate temple, God's alternative to the surrounding culture with its idols and aspirations, the place where people can meet the living God (1 Cor 3).

So, the question we must ask is simply this: as individuals, is it our great passion to know Christ and to make him known in word and deed? *And as a congregation, are those our passions: worshipping God, learning his Word, ministering to*

the broken, and reaching out to the nations? Or have we removed whole areas of our life as individuals and as a congregation from those concerns, and given them over to a passion for the idols of our culture: namely, the relentless quest for whatever we think will make us happy?

4. How might Jesus respond to the crisis in God's house today?

The real question is this: if we are the house of God, then how would he have us respond? Let me suggest a few areas we might look this morning to try to assess just how we might begin to do some much needed house-cleaning this coming week:

- As individuals:
 - Do we begin our day by offering ourselves in heartfelt worship to the One to whom we owe our lives, all we are and have?
 - Do we offer our bodies daily as a place for God to dwell, and through which he might shape his world?
 - Do we offer our resources daily as means through which he might accomplish his ends?

- Do we offer to him those we love, asking him to use them to accomplish — not our purposes — but his?
- Do we offer him our hopes, our dreams and desires, asking him to conform them to his?
- The practical effect is this: a life lived increasingly in fellowship with the living God, which will one day be revealed to have eternal significance in accomplishing God's will and extending his kingdom, not to mention a growing sense of the love and joy and peace of the presence of God.
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- As a congregation:
 - Are we ruthlessly evaluating our worship services to see whether or not they help draw us to a deeper, more joyful and passionate worship of God?
 - Are we ruthlessly evaluating our teaching ministries to see whether or not they are disciple us into a deeper love of God and of one another?

- Do we show the compassion of Christ through concrete diaconal ministries to those whom the world despises?
- Are we ruthlessly evaluating our mission outreach to see whether or not we are reaching out to our community and to the world in ways that declare God's grace and glory in word and in demonstrations of his love and compassion?

Concl:

As we enter this holiest of weeks, as we move in our memory through the passion week with our Lord Jesus, and remember all that he endured in order to redeem us, let's consecrate ourselves afresh to cleansing ourselves of all that would keep us from our high and holy calling, all that would keep others away from God, all that would cause them to stumble, all that might keep God's house from being "a house of prayer for all the nations."

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