

## The Upside Down Guide to Life:

### *When God cleans the house*

**John 2:13-22**

**March 19, 2006 (the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent)**

I have to be honest: one of the best things about being a parent is playing with my kid's toys. I love toys and now that I have a daughter getting married in May, I miss toys. For instance, we used to have all kinds of simple puzzles like this. Of course the best thing about a puzzle is watching it slowly come together. So piece by piece you bring order out of chaos and create a picture. And then when that final piece is put in place, you see with your own eyes that the story is now complete. The world has been set right and your heart is satisfied.

I mention this childish example because when we read the Bible we have to remember that God is always bringing the pieces together. The pieces aren't random; there is a sense of wholeness and coherence to the big picture of God's story in the Bible. So when Jesus comes and heals the sick, feeds the hungry and dies for our sin and cleanses the temple, it's always part of a much bigger picture. Everything Jesus did fits into this larger, grander picture of God's story of redemption. Now if that's too simplistic for you, let me quote from perhaps the premier New Testament scholar alive today, N.T. Wright: "As the story of the exodus (or the Old Testament) is the story of how God redeemed Israel, so the story of the cross is the story of how God redeemed the world through Israel in person, in Jesus." In other words, the Bible contains one story and one picture.

This may sound abstract but let's apply it to the Gospel reading we heard this morning. First, let's just review what happened – because this is a shocking and unsettling story. Jesus is really ticked off. So let's enter into the story. Obviously, I'll be speaking to those who aren't familiar with the stories of the Bible, but I'm more concerned with people (like me) who have heard these stories hundreds of times. We assume that we know this story; unfortunately, this story has lost its impact. We need a fresh encounter with this story – and Jesus! Second, let's back up and look at how this piece fits into the bigger picture of God's story, the biblical story. And then, finally, let's ask what this means for us today. This third point is what I love about the Bible: it makes sense, the pieces all fit together and it changes our life. It feeds our mind and transforms our heart.

The story we read begins in verse 13. The Passover was the annual celebration that recalled how God had compassion on His people while they were enslaved in Egypt. God saw their bondage and delivered them. As an observant Jew, Jesus joins the mob of pilgrims who made the annual trip to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Again, Jesus was a Jew, and everything he did must be understood in the context of the one story that God is telling, the one picture God is putting together.

Now if you read all four Gospels you'll notice something strange about this story: the other three Gospel writers – Matthew, Mark and Luke – place this story right before Jesus dies on the cross. John places it right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. This causes some people to say, "Aha, you see: the Bible is full of errors and contradictions." What do we

make of this? Some people argue that maybe Jesus cleansed the temple twice. As we'll see in a minute this is a very dramatic action so it's highly unlikely that Jesus did it twice. The most logical explanation is that John puts the story up front because he wants to tell us that this event defines who Jesus is and what he came to do. In other words, John is saying, "If you want to understand Jesus, let me tell what happened when he came into the temple. Listen carefully: if you 'get' this, you'll start to 'get' Jesus." Now is this bad history? Not at all. John isn't a clumsy historian; he's a master storyteller. For instance, if I wrote my life story today, I wouldn't start with my birth in Bloomington, MN in 1959. I might begin in 1975 when Christ saved me or in 1982 when I met my wife or in 2001 when we moved to Long Island because those events define who I am today. John is also starting with a pivotal event to tell the story of Jesus.

So Jesus travels to Jerusalem, enters the temple and what happens? Read verse 14. Let's try to imagine that we're Jerusalem during this Passover week. Jerusalem, the capital city, is mobbed with religious tourists. It's hard for us to grasp the significance of the temple. The reconstruction of the temple was started by Herod the Great in 19 BC but the construction would continue for years. It was a magnificent structure, covering 25% of the city, its massive white stones glistening in the sun. Its spiritual significance was even more profound. This wasn't just a church building; this was like every church building rolled into one. It was THE place where the people met God. It was THE place where religious transactions took place. If you really wanted to find God, get right with God, be a decent and religious person, you went to the temple.

The temple represents the zenith of all of our religious impulses and efforts. And as Jesus walks on to scene he confronts a mob of busy, noisy, energetic religious people. They are all doing their religious best. There are programs for the kids, spiritual feeding opportunities for the adults, a rock band upstairs, organ music in the sanctuary, a prayer group and bingo in the basement, group therapy in the office, bagels and Starbucks coffee in the Commons, Weight Watchers and yoga downstairs, and you can get your money changed at five convenient ATM machines in the foyer. What a church! Everyone is so busy and trying so hard to be a good, religious person. Everyone is pleased with this bustling activity ...

Everyone except Jesus. Read verses 15-16. In the midst of the busy religious activity, there is a sudden uproar. First, you'd hear tables crashing over and coins scattering on the ground. People are running in all directions, doves are flying around your head and the sheep and cattle are started to charge. (I've spent time on dairy farms I can tell you that it's not easy to get cows moving. But once they start moving, things get wild and unpredictable). As you watch the chaos, you see a man coming towards you. He's a man with a strong physical presence (he used to work as a carpenter) and he has a crude, homemade whip in his hands. And he's angry. His face flushed with rage, he turns to the dove sellers and yells, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market?" The Greek word Jesus used for market was the word translated as emporium. "You've turned God's temple into a flea market of religiosity," he boldly claims, "and I've come to clean house."

The religious leaders are justifiably incensed. He has no right to be here. So they ask him, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” It’s a good question. Jesus should be arrested for this behavior, but he acts like he’s in charge of the temple. He doesn’t apologize for his actions. Then Jesus gives this enigmatic response: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it again.” What, are you nuts, they respond in verse 20? But then as the author and the disciples reflect back on this story they remember that the “temple he had spoken of was his body” (verse 21).

That’s the story. Now what does it mean and how does it fit into the bigger story that God is telling? Remember if John is placing this story upfront as a life-defining statement of who Jesus is, then what does this tell us about Jesus? If we don’t understand the big picture, we may conclude that Jesus was just losing his cool – as a contemporary Hindu author said, “(Jesus’ actions are) not altogether an exemplary piece of behavior.” In other words, Jesus is out of control and he’s a bad role model. Or we may conclude that the main point of this passage is that if can make some external, religious rules – like, never sell CD’s and bagels and cookbooks on Sunday morning – we’ll really be worshipping God. That also misses the point. Jesus is making a much more radical and life-transforming statement.

Part of the big picture of the Bible is what’s called the prophetic tradition, a thread that runs all through the Old Testament. It’s a powerful, unsettling tradition. Jesus not only knew this tradition by heart, he claimed to complete and fulfill this tradition.

There were two features to this prophetic tradition. First, God was rightfully angry with his people because they kept missing the point of it all. So week after week they would show up and praise God with all their might but they seemed a lot more concerned with the right form of religion rather than the right heart and life of faith. As one example listen to God’s words spoken in the Old Testament prophet Amos: “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies ... Take away from me the noise of your songs.” Now can you imagine trying so hard to be religious and proper and careful and God says, “I don’t care what you’re singing – praise songs, hymns, Gospel, pop, rock, reggae, arias - I don’t like any of it. I hate it. It’s just a bunch noise in my ears.” To which I might say, “What do you want, God? We’re all trying so hard to be decent, religious people.” God told the people of Amos’ day, “But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:21-24). In other words, God says, “I don’t just want your forms and your religious efforts; I want you; I want your heart. You’ve wandered away from me and I want you back. I love you. And I want you to listen to me and follow me. I want you to turn your face outwards towards the world’s lost and oppressed.” Now lest you think that I’m standing up here looking down on all of you, let me remind you that God’s harshest words were directed at the pastors and spiritual leaders (see Micah 3:11).

That’s the first part of this prophetic tradition: God’s people kept missing the point of the big picture. The second part of the prophetic tradition is that God promised to do something about it. God promised to clean his house. If you turn to your Bible, the last book in the Old Testament is the book of the prophet Malachi (some people pronounce it

Ma-la-chi but he wasn't Italian; he was Jewish). Through Malachi God promised to come to his temple and clean it up. He was going to do something about the sin of his people. Turn with me to page 675. Listen to words of God through Malachi. Read 1:3-5 and 3:1. "Hmm, that sounds great. I'd love to have the Lord show up and do some light spring cleaning." But let's read on (see 3:2-3). The Lord, the world's Messiah and Savior, will show up, but he won't act like Barney or Mr. Rogers. It's going to be like gold and silver melted down in a furnace. He's going to clean house starting with his own house.

There is a powerful principle at work here (and we find it throughout the New Testament too): when God moves to help people and clean up the world, he always starts with his own house first. Now most of us don't like this idea and most good Jews of Jesus' day did not want a Messiah-King who would come and clean them up. They wanted a powerful ruler who would clean up the bad guys, overthrowing the Roman occupiers who were causing all their misery. We're the same way. Most of us don't want to hear bad news – unless, of course, it's bad news about someone else. We want God to judge and clean up the world by starting with the really bad people out there; but God always starts to clean up his own house first. As the New Testament book of Peter says, "The time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God" (1 Peter 4:17). Notice where it begins: the household of God.

This is so radical. I don't usually think that I need the refiner's fire. Maybe my neighbors, my family members, maybe some really messed up people out there. Yes, I have a few dents that need to be pounded out and polished up. "O, no," God says, "you don't just need a little buffing and polishing; you need to be melted down in a furnace. We need to remake you. You need to be born again." This isn't negative and scary because God is interested in our redemption. God loves us and is for us (Romans 8:31-32; Mark 8:35-37). And God wants to create a community of people who truly for one another and therefore they truly bring healing to one another's lives.

Well, let's return to the Gospel story in John 2. So Malachi said, "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple ... But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appears?" Now we're told in John 2:22 that even those first followers of Jesus didn't get this right away; some of this only clicked "after he was raised from the dead." Then it dawned on them: *Wait a minute, hmm ... coming to the temple, who may abide his coming, who shall stand when he appears? Wait a minute, that sounds just like John 2. Why, of course, that piece fits right here! It's all making sense. Jesus is the coming one. Jesus is the refining one. Jesus is the one who cleans us up and makes us whole. It's all starting to fit together.*

But Jesus is even more than that: Jesus is the new temple. Remember what the temple was: it was the meeting place between God and the human race. It was the place where you went to get it right with God. It was the place of busy religiosity. In this story Jesus isn't just tinkering with or adjusting religiosity; he's replacing it – and he's replacing it with himself. That's the point of verses 19-21. The temple was the place where God would dwell among his people. Now Jesus is the new temple; he's the place where God

dwells among his people. The temple was the place where sacrifices were made to pay the debt of sin. Now Jesus' body is the temple where our sins were paid for. In other words, Jesus didn't just come to clean up and revise religion; he came to complete and fulfill it and replace it.

Now what does this mean to us on a practical level?

1. Jesus Christ is our way home to God. I know a man who is searching for something – he really doesn't know what. He has everything money can buy. When he found out I'm a pastor who told me, "You don't want to know what I think of religion." I said, "Come on, tell me what you think. We value what people think at our church. We like good questions." "Okay, he said, here it goes: I think religion is valuable for children. It keeps them in line, but I don't need it. I don't need to be told that I'm a wretched sinner. That's the message I got growing up in the church: try harder, be better and give more. I just lost interest. It's not useful." But then he said something interesting: "But you know, I look at my life sometimes, I own everything I want, I love my job, I can play golf and travel whenever I want, and some days I ask myself, 'Is this all there is?'" This man is a seeker. Now the amazing thing about the Gospel is not so much our search for God, but God's search for us. In Jesus we don't find more religion – more religious efforts and activities. Instead we find the way home to God. The Gospel, the good news of Jesus, is not a story of how we can search for God or get right with God or do wonderful things for God. It is first and foremost a story of what God has done for us. God has opened the way for us to come home to Him. We have a temple where we can meet God – don't have to travel – it is there. The new and living way. Jesus.
2. Because this is true, because Christ is our Way and Truth and Life, of all people on the face of the earth, true Christians are the ones who can face our sin and our garbage – and allow God to clean it up. Author Rebecca Pippert (in her very good book entitled **Hope Has Its Reasons**) tells the story of her friend who was describing an AA meeting to her. "I walked into this room," he said, "and the first thing I sensed was there wasn't a person in the room who had not suffered. They had come face to face with their weakness, their inability to change without outside help ... They really believed that God could help me ... They embraced me as I was, a drunk, but they were certain that I could be changed. I felt like I was in the fellowship of the wounded, the wounded but healed." "But Bob," Rebecca Pippert cried out, "that is the best description of the church that I've ever heard!" Bob said, "Let me tell you about the times I went to church during my drinking days. The message was always polite but firm: 'Come back when you have your act together ... (Our problem is that) we really don't believe that the problem rests in us. We think the problem is 'our there'; we are good and respectable in here.'" If you were at the men's breakfast yesterday, you would have heard the same message. Because Christ has come, because he has taken our sin upon himself, because he has paid the price and set us free and there is no condemnation, we can allow him to clean up the sin and garbage in our lives.
3. If that is true, what kind of passionate, remarkable, uncompromising, daring, and sold-out lives we ought to live. I love the story John Piper tells about his fiery

preacher-father. Apparently, his father preached week after week in his hometown church and a man resisted the Gospel for years. Finally, when God's Spirit broke through and touched this man's heart, he came walking down the aisle and opened his heart to Christ. With tears streaming down his face, this man sobbed, "I've wasted it! I've wasted it!" John Piper comments: *"This was the story that gripped me more than all the stories of young people who died in car wrecks before they were converted – the story of an old man weeping that he had wasted his life. In those early years (of my life) God awakened in me a fear and a passion to not waste my life. The thought of coming to my old age and saying through tears, 'I've wasted it! I've wasted it!' was a fearful and horrible thought to me."* If this is true – and perhaps you don't believe that this morning, but if you do – then what sold-out, uncompromising lives we ought to live for God. I look at my life this past week and I see so many examples of pettiness and smallness and meanness. "O, God," we must pray, "don't let me waste my life. Let me live it wholly for you. Amen.