

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Scott Kenefake, Interim Senior Pastor**  
**“Turning the Tables”**  
**Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22**  
**3rd Sunday in Lent**  
**March 4, 2018**

Tonight is the 90<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards ceremony, presented by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, to honor the best films of 2017. It will take place at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood and comedian Jimmy Kimmel will host for a second consecutive year.

You may recall that last year the **award** for “Best Picture” was given to “Moonlight” after presenters Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway mistakenly announced that “La La Land” had won—and chaos briefly ensued! Who know what will happen this year?

But whether you love, loathe, or are completely indifferent to the Oscars—and similar awards ceremonies--the interesting thing to me about watching contemporary films is seeing *what they have to say about our contemporary culture and the state of the world*. They are a *window* into what people are thinking and feeling, what they hope for and fear, and whether things are on the “right track” or the “wrong track”—at any given time.

For example, Stephen Spielberg’s, *“The Post,”* is a film about the release of the “Pentagon Papers” by CIA Operative, Daniel Ellsberg, that revealed that the government had known for years that the Vietnam War was unwinnable and was lying to the American public, the Washington Post’s legal fight to publish them, and the Nixon administration’s attempt to prevent it. Here’s an excerpt from a review:

*For all its period detail ... this is an urgently contemporary tale ... Hitting our screens as the current White House incumbent raves about news media being “the enemy of the American people”, The Post offers a reminder that “the founding fathers gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfil its essential role... to serve the governed, not the governors”. The film-making may hardly be groundbreaking, but this story is more relevant than ever, and it is told with wit, precision and understated passion.<sup>1</sup>*

Another insightful film of 2017 is *Get Out*. The film critiques the insidious racism that lurks just beneath a veneer of white liberal do-gooder-ism by telling the story of a young black photographer named Chris (Daniel Kaluuya), who anxiously visits the suburban family home of his Caucasian girlfriend, Rose (Allison Williams). One reviewer said this:

*What makes Get Out more than just a slam-bang scare-fest is that, in its own darkly satiric way, it is also a movie about racial paranoia that captures the (current) zeitgeist in ways that many more “prestigious” movies don’t.<sup>2</sup>*

Which brings us to our Gospel reading today from John—the story of Jesus “Cleansing the Temple” in Jerusalem—a *window* into the social and religious world of Jesus and the early church—and into our world, as well.

You see, during the last week of his life, Jesus entered the temple area [[Slide 7] or “temple mount,” a large flat platform of about 35 acres. On it were various courts and buildings, including the main temple building (the sanctuary itself). Relatively small, it (like most temples in the ancient world) was not really a public building but was understood as “the house of ... god,” a residence for the divine. Public worship took place in the courts

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Kermode, “*The Post* review—all the news they don’t want you to print,” The Guardian, January 21, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Peter Rainer, Socially conscious horror movies don't get any better than 'Get Out', Christian Science Monitor, March 10, 2017

surrounding the sanctuary: the priests' court, the court of Israel (for Jewish males only), and the court of the women. Beyond these courts were other courts, including one where sacrificial animals were sold and the image bearing coins of pilgrims were exchanged for "holy" coins, that is, coins without images. Access to the temple area was strictly limited for Gentiles (non-Jews), who were not permitted beyond a certain point under penalty of death.

It was in one of those outer courts that Jesus performed this dramatic prophetic act. In what has been called his "greatest public deed," he expelled the moneychangers and sellers of sacrificial birds. It was a provocative action and must have created somewhat of a stir if not an uproar. Yet also quite clearly it was not intended as a takeover or occupation of the temple area. Had it been so, it is inexplicable why the Romans, whose garrison overlooked the temple courts, did not immediately intervene.

Rather, it was a prophetic act, limited in area, intent, and duration, done for the sake of the *message* it conveyed. As often with prophetic acts, the action was accompanied by a pronouncement which interpreted its meaning: "*Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?' But you have made it a den of robbers.*"

Here, as most often in Scripture, *nations* (in the first quote) means "Gentiles." The purpose of the temple, Jesus said, was *universal*. It was not to be the private possession of a particular group, not even of the (Jewish) people.

And the second quote stated what the temple had become: "*You have made it a den of violent ones.*" The common translation, "*den of robbers,*" obscures the meaning, as if the issue were dishonest business practices or the gouging of pilgrims.

Rather, the phrase quotes Jeremiah; there "*violent ones*" referred to those who believed that the temple provided security in spite of their violations of the covenant. And Jesus is saying that the temple now faced the same threat as in Jeremiah's generation: destruction.

So, Jesus' act was both a threat and an indictment. Because the temple had become a center of violence, it faced judgment. The act challenged the ethos of *holiness*: the clear-cut distinction between sacred and profane, pure and impure, holy nation and impure nation; the sacred order of separation, even as it was also an invitation to another way; the way of *compassion and inclusion*—*the way of Jesus and the great Jewish prophets, like Jeremiah*.<sup>3</sup>

So, the gospel writer whom we call John, through a newly invented literary art form that we call a "Gospel," is using this story to provide a *window* into the very heart of the meaning of the mission and ministry of Jesus:

As John Dominic Crossan has said: "*Jesus went to Jerusalem ... and ... the spiritual and economic egalitarianism he preached in Galilee exploded in indignation at the Temple as the seat and symbol of all that was non-egalitarian, patronal, and even oppressive on both the religious and political level. Jesus' symbolic destruction simply actualized what he had already said in his teachings, effected in his healings, and realized in his mission of open commensality [open table fellowship]—what we call Communion.*"<sup>4</sup>

I want you to think about this in terms of another Oscar nominated film for 2016—a documentary about the writer, James Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*.

Drawn from an unpublished and unfinished manuscript by James Baldwin, "I Am Not Your Negro" is a scorching, stunningly relevant documentary, almost hypnotically combining the late author's provocative words and interviews with cinematic and historical images--the project simultaneously looks back and forward, resonating as both history and present-day social commentary at a time of Black Lives Matter and #Oscars-So-White.

This is not, notably, a biography; rather, director Raoul Peck has created what amounts to an extended visual essay, weaving together footage that lends weight to Baldwin's powerful prose.

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<sup>3</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision*, Harper, San Francisco, 1987, pp. 174, 175, 176

<sup>4</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, Harper, San Francisco, 1994, p. 133.

Peck gained access to material from Baldwin's estate, using 30 pages written for a planned book devoted to the lives and assassinations of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. as the film's thematic spine.

The result is a sweeping look at race relations, and in particular how African Americans have been depicted in media. For those marginally familiar with him, it's also a bracing introduction to Baldwin as a social commentator, with Samuel L. Jackson breathing life into his writings, augmented by extensive clips of the author in venues such as *The Dick Cavett Show*.

Most impressively, Peck visually connects Baldwin's decades-old musings to current events through scenes of recent racial unrest, incorporating footage from places like Ferguson, Mo. Similarly, as Baldwin speaks of a media environment "designed not to trouble, but to reassure," images of game shows flash across the screen.

Peck thus weaves together Baldwin's thoughts on politics, culture and race. The blacks he saw in movies in his youth, Baldwin wrote, "lied about the world I knew" with their exaggerated images of "comic, bug-eyed terror." All the heroes, meanwhile, were white, a thought juxtaposed with John Wayne galloping across the screen in "Stagecoach."

Baldwin -- who died in 1987 -- also contemplates the messages conveyed by movies like "The Defiant Ones" and "Imitation of Life," as well as how the movies presented civil-rights era African American stars such as Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte.

The tale of African Americans, Baldwin observed, "is not a pretty story. ... This is not the land of the free."

With "I Am Not Your Negro," Peck has taken Baldwin's view of that history -- how he saw it then and its implications now -- and turned it into a pretty brilliant, thought-provoking film.<sup>5</sup>

But the most interesting part of the film for me—and the part that relates directly to our Gospel reading for today—was to be reminded of Baldwin's famous quote:

*"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed if it is not faced."*

Both Jesus and Baldwin had the courage to face what needed to be changed. Do we have that same courage today?

Friends, in a moment we will affirm our common faith with a selection from *The Theological Declaration of Barmen*, (from our Book of Confessions) [a document adopted by Christians in Nazi Germany who opposed the *Deutsche Christen* (German Christian) movement. In the view of the delegates to the Synod that met in the city of Barmen in May, 1934, the German Christians had corrupted church government by making it subservient to the state and had introduced Nazi ideology into the German Protestant churches that contradicted the Christian gospel.

The Declaration was mostly written by the Reformed theologian [Slide 15] Karl Barth but underwent some modification, as a result of input from several Lutheran theologians.

The document became the chief confessional document of the so-called Confessing Church, that included anti-Nazi theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

One of the main purposes of the Declaration was to establish a three-church confessional consensus opposing pro-Nazi "*German Christianity*". These three churches were Lutheran, Reformed, and United.

And not coincidentally, Gail and I saw *Davidson Community Players* production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

It, too, is a window, enabling us to see the courage that is needed to face what needs to be changed in church and society today.

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Lowry, "I Am Not Your Negro" brings James Baldwin's words to life," CNN, February 17, 2017