

Zeal For My Father's House

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 03 January 2021

Preacher: Rev. Kevin Antlitz

[0 : 00] Good morning once again. My name's Kevin, one of the pastors here, and it's a joy to be worshipping together. Even though we're not gathered together in person, it is still good to worship the Lord in spirit and in truth. And it's a pleasure to be preaching this morning.

Now, like many of you, the end of every year, I spend some time reflecting on the past year, what happened, celebrating the good things, mourning some of the difficult things, reorienting my priorities and setting goals that, let's be honest, I probably won't accomplish.

I don't know why I keep doing it. It feels a little bit better to call them goals instead of resolutions, but all the same. There's been a lot to process in 2020. So much has happened, so much hasn't happened, both of which has been hard. And I think it's been a particularly difficult year to follow Jesus. Honestly, I can't imagine this year without Jesus by my side, but following him hasn't come easy either. I think that if somebody was looking for a reason to stop following Jesus over these past 10 months, they wouldn't have had to look very far. Of course, there's the pandemic, which has disrupted all of our rhythms, but that's not what I'm thinking about. That's not what I'm talking about this morning. I want to focus this morning on some of the scandals of the church from 2020, the moral corruption of some of its most prominent leaders. 2020 has been a brutal year in this regard for the church. Now, our text this morning is perhaps a strange Christmastide passage, but I actually think it's ideal for reflecting on 2020 and thinking about what the Lord has in store for us in this year ahead. And so this morning, I want to consider the incarnation of Jesus Christ through the lens of this scandalous scene in the Gospel of John and draw out three reasons for the incarnation, three reasons why the Word became flesh. We'll see that Jesus came to be the temple, he came to cleanse the temple, and he came to build a new temple. Let's pray together. Father, as we sit under your Word, we pray and we know, Lord, that it will not return empty. Pray that you would instruct us, that you would comfort the afflicted, that you would afflict the comfortable, and offer your glory. We pray these things in Jesus' holy name. Amen. So first, we're going to see that Jesus came to be the temple.

The first verses of our passage set the scene for us in verses 13 and 14. We read, the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem, and we find him in the temple.

So right from the start, our passage assumes quite a bit about us. It assumes that we have a great deal of background knowledge about Jesus' Judaism. If we don't understand the importance of the things that are mentioned here, of the Passover and of Jerusalem and of the temple, I think we'll miss the point of this passage, and perhaps more importantly, we'll miss the scandal of the incarnation, the scandal of Jesus' claim to be the temple of God. So first, we need to wrap our minds around the Passover, what it means, why it's important. Well, it's an annual religious festival still celebrated by the Jews, where it commemorates their liberation from slavery in Egypt.

[3 : 30] Passover was the celebration of their redemption. It's kind of like Christian's Easter. We read about this in Exodus 12. God commanded the people, his people, to sacrifice a lamb and to put blood, the blood of the sacrificed lamb, on their doorposts. We read this in Exodus 12, 13.

The blood on your doorpost shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

So Passover celebrates God's gracious deliverance of his people. This is actually the founding event of the people of God. And the Passover is the reason why Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem.

It's one of the pilgrimage festivals. The Jews would journey up to Jerusalem every year to worship, and they traveled to Jerusalem because Jerusalem was the gravitational center of the world.

It's the holy city, the city of kings, the city of promise. It's the place where God dwells. And in reality, Jerusalem matters because that's where the temple is, and the temple matters because that's where God is. The temple is where heaven and earth meet. It's the place of God's presence.

[4 : 45] The temple is the place where God dwells and human beings can meet him. We see this in its purest form in the Garden of Eden, the first temple that we see in the Bible, where God and humans walked together.

And then this theme of the temple is traced all the way through the Old Testament, even into the New, as we'll see. We see it in the tabernacle in the wilderness. We see it in the temple that Solomon built, and in the second temple that the exiles rebuilt when they returned to Jerusalem. The temple is holy ground. It's a kind of portal into the presence of God. And for Jews, their relationship with God revolved around the temple and the sacrifices offered there. Knowing all of this helps us to understand the scandal of our passage. And I'm not just talking about Jesus going into the temple and turning over tables. We'll look at that in a moment. But perhaps the most scandalous thing about this passage is how Jesus justifies this violent action. We see it in verses 18 to 21. So the Jews said to him, what sign do you show us for doing these things? For driving people out of the temple and overturning tables? And Jesus answered them, destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Now it's important to note that the Jews had no idea what Jesus was talking about. They took him literally. They misunderstood what he was saying. If they knew what he was actually saying, they probably would have tried to kill him on the spot. Jesus wasn't talking about the physical temple. He was talking about the temple of his body. That's what it says. He was speaking about the temple of his body. Verse 21,

Jesus is predicting his crucifixion and his resurrection. So why is this so scandalous? Well, Jesus is saying essentially, my body replaces the brick and mortar. He's saying, I am the place where God is. If you want to meet God, it's not in the temple. It's through me, the true temple. If you want to be made right with God, it's not through these lambs that you're about to offer and sacrifice during Passover. It's through me, the true lamb of God. You see, the temple is holy ground. And I think it's difficult for us modern Westerners to grasp this, to fully appreciate what's going on, because I don't think we have quite the same tie to places and spaces. Perhaps the closest analogy might be our view of the Scriptures, the Holy Scriptures. Imagine someone busting into this church service, running down one of these aisles, and grabbing this Bible behind me, throwing it on the floor, and saying, you don't need to listen to that any longer. You need to listen to me, because I am the true mouthpiece of God. It'd be very disruptive, because this is an empty room, and it'd be very noisy. But imagine if that happened in a normal worship service.

It would be scandalous. I think this is essentially what Jesus is doing. He busts into the temple. He says and does stuff that would have sounded absolutely crazy to everybody. And it would have been crazy if it didn't happen to be true. And so in this scene, we're witnessing a spiritual earthquake.

The gravitational center of the world has moved, and it happens to be wherever Jesus is standing. So that's the first thing that we see in this passage. We see that Jesus came to be the temple of God, and that was a scandalous thing. And the second thing we see is that Jesus came to cleanse the temple. Verse 14, in the temple, he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons and the money changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple with the sheep and the oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money changers, and he overturned their tables.

[8 : 35] This is a wild scene. And what's most interesting to me about this scene, apart from the obvious, is that nobody else seemed to be bothered by what was going on in the temple. Everyone but Jesus seems totally fine with this setup, with this arrangement. So what's going on, and why does Jesus get so mad when nobody else seems to be batting an eye? Well, the issue isn't that people were buying and selling animals and exchanging money. You see, the animals were bought and sold in Jerusalem, and this was a service to the pilgrims who were traveling from far distances, so that they could actually offer sacrifices and worship the Lord. Imagine schlepping an ox or a lamb on a three-day journey through dangerous terrain, and imagine trying to do that without the animal getting injured and becoming defiled, not being able to actually offer it to the Lord after such a long journey.

Likewise, the Jews, when they would travel up to the Passover, to the temple, they were required to pay a temple tax. The temple tax was for the maintenance of the temple and the ministry that happened there. And pilgrims were traveling from all over the Roman Empire, and they were traveling with Roman currency. The problem was the Roman currency wasn't welcome in the temple because the Jews hated the Romans. So they had to exchange their coins for coins that would be suitable for the temple tax, and they had to do that somewhere. So the businessmen in the temple were providing an essential service to the pilgrims. So why did Jesus get so mad about it? Well, the problem wasn't the buying and the selling per se. The problem had everything to do with where it happened. I'm paraphrasing verse 16 here. Jesus says, get this stuff out of here. How dare you make my father's house a market?

The problem was that they were doing this stuff in the temple. And more specifically, they were doing this stuff in the court of the Gentiles, which was this large outer court that surrounded the temple.

And this place was as far as non-Jews could go who went to the temple to worship the Lord. This court of the Gentiles was meant to be a quiet place of prayer for all nations, and it became the busiest farmer's market that you could imagine. The only place that non-Jews could go was filled with thousands of noisy pilgrims and noisy animals packed shoulder to shoulder. And trigger warning here with this crowd, none of them were wearing masks. It wasn't just inhospitable. This showed disregard and even disdain for the Gentiles who desired to worship God. So what was being done in the temple was essentially preventing true worship. And this absolutely scandalized Jesus. And so what we see is a side of Jesus not often talked about, a side we should talk more about, I think. This isn't sweet baby Jesus, meek and mild, whose soft skin is vulnerable to the violence of the world. No, we see

Jesus, the zealous prophet with fire in his eyes, the closest he gets to physical violence. I don't know how else to say it, but in this scene, Jesus is pissed. And he puts together a whip, and he uses that whip to drive man and beast out of the temple. This is a side of Jesus. Jesus is the prophet that we would do well to pay more attention to. As I've been reflecting on this scene at the end of the year and what it means for us, I've thought a lot about the things that have happened in 2020.

[12 : 12] You know, we don't have people buying and selling things in the church, or I should say at least not in the same way, but we have had our fair share of scandals this past year. Horrible things that have happened in the church that are tragic obstacles that are preventing true worship of God.

I think of Jean Vanier. Some of you have probably heard of him. He was a Roman Catholic priest, the founder of L'Arche, an amazing ministry. It's a network of communities around the globe for people with developmental disabilities and those who care for him. He died in mid-2019, and he would have been considered a living saint when he was alive. Most anyone who met Jean Vanier would say that he was the closest thing to a living saint that they had ever come across. In February 2020, just before the pandemic really exploded, L'Arche revealed that Vanier was actually living a deeply dark double life.

He was sexually abusing women over a period of 35 years at the height of his ministry. And so with Vanier, we see a priest who devoted his life to caring for the most vulnerable, and yet he was a man who used his power to abuse vulnerable women for almost four decades.

I think of Ravi Zacharias, perhaps this hits a bit closer to home. You've probably heard of him, a famous defender of the faith. He's had a massive impact for the kingdom in a lot of ways. I'd be willing to bet that those of you who are listening to this live stream from home have probably attended one of his events or listened to a podcast or read one of his books, or you know somebody who has.

Few people have done more to defend the truths of Christianity. I think you can make the case. And yet, two days before Christmas, just a few days ago, RZIM, the ministry that he founded, confirmed the allegations of sexual misconduct, allegations that they denied for a long time, I should say, that these allegations were not only true, but the independent investigation that they had going on discovered still more. And so we see with Ravi, an apologist who defended his life to defending the faith, did terrible things, which called the truthfulness of that very faith into question.

[14 : 31] I think of Carl Lentz and the corrosive influence of celebrity culture. I think of Jerry Falwell Jr. and the corrupting desire for political power. And I could mention more. We could be here all morning talking about the scandals of 2020. And I'm naming leaders, but the problem is not just at the top.

Just as in Jesus' day, so it is with us. All of the people are implicated. David French talks about this in a really powerful article called, The Church Needs Prophets, But It Wants Lawyers. He says this, and don't think for a moment that these failings are isolated to Zacharias alone or to people like Liberty University's Jerry Falwell Jr. or Hillsong's Carl Lentz.

These powerful men were coddled and enabled by other powerful men and then automatically and reflexively defended by thousands upon thousands of angry and loyal Christian followers until the evidence of their malfeasance was open and irrefutable. You see, this spiritual rot is not isolated to our leaders. Behind every broken leader is a whole complex of enablers, board members, elders, elders, staff, parishioners, followers, people who in one way or another allow people to remain in power and continue to do damage. Carl Lentz isn't the problem. The whole church is sick. And 2020 revealed just how sick we are. Some 2,000 years ago, Jesus said, do not make my father's house a market. I wonder what he would say to the church today.

Do not make my father's house a celebrity award show. Do not make my father's house a political rally. Do not make my father's house a haven for sexual predators. We desperately need Christ to cleanse us. And I think that's exactly what he's been doing this past year. Jesus is still zealous for his father's house. And he's been cleansing the temple of God once again. He's exposing sin, exposing corruption, creating opportunities for real repentance and reconciliation.

The light is still shining in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. So now I want to bring all of this together and talk about how Jesus didn't ultimately cleanse the temple to condemn it. But he cleansed the temple, and he came third and finally to build a new temple.

[17 : 12] We see that after Jesus drove everyone out with a whip, his disciples remembered a Bible verse. A passage from the Psalter came to mind, Psalm 69, 9, which reads, zeal for your house will consume me.

Now, this verse has a double meaning. Of course, it refers to Jesus' intensity of emotion, his righteous anger, where his consuming zeal led him to cleanse the temple, to drive people out with a whip. But consumed can also mean to be devoured or to be destroyed. Quoting this Psalm foreshadows Jesus' death.

If you keep reading the Psalm, it's really interesting. It says this, Zeal for your house will consume me. The reproaches of those who reproach you, Lord, have fallen on me.

His actions here, cleansing the temple, would ultimately lead to his sacrificial and substitutionary death. The temple was destroyed, and in three days it was raised up. And Jesus was raised from the dead, not just to save sinners, but to build a new temple, the church.

Listen to how Paul describes the church with this temple language in Ephesians 2. He says, those who were once far from God have now been brought near to God by the blood of Jesus, because Jesus is the true temple. And then he says in Ephesians 2, 19, then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

[19 : 07] Jesus is so committed to the temple, we see, that he gives his life to build a new one. And Jesus is not an absentee landlord. He will never leave us or forsake us. He died to purchase us, and he lives to restore us, his temple. This is what Jesus has been doing for 2,000 years, and this is what Jesus was doing in 2020, and this is what he'll continue to do in 2021.

Jesus is zealously committed to his church. But his church, as 2020 shows us, is far from perfect. The church is a messy place. It's filled with recovering sinners, broken people being amended by Jesus Christ. It's a messy place, or at least it's supposed to be. The church is not a palace.

It's not a palace, at least not yet. It's better described as a fixer-upper. A fixer-upper with a solid foundation. And there are still a lot of repairs to be done.

And that means being surprised that the church is full of messed up and broken people makes about as much sense as being surprised that our house, our fixer-upper, has some ugly bathrooms, some holes in the walls, maybe even in the floor, and smells a bit like smoke.

Smoke is hard stuff to get out of a house. Jesus is renovating us, but renovations are hard. 2020 was a hard year, and there's no promise that 2021 will be any easier. But Jesus is continuing his renovation project. He's still doing work in us and on us. And the renovations are probably more painful, more drastic, and certainly more amazing than we ever dared imagine. And Jesus is committed to seeing us through. I want to end my sermon this morning with a passage from C.S. Lewis's Mere Christianity, where he describes this in a really beautiful way. Listen to what he writes. He says, Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He's getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. You knew that those jobs needed doing, and so you are not surprised. But presently, he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense.

[21 : 35] What on earth is he up to? Well, the explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of. Throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself. Let's pray.

Father, we come before you broken for the brokenness of your church. But Lord, we are encouraged that you are zealous for your house. We know that you're restoring us because you plan to live in us. You do live in us by your spirit. I pray for our church, Lord, that you would build us up in this next year, that you would grow us up into the house that you desire us to be. Help us to trust you as you do so. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.