

Text: John 2:13-25
Title: Locating God
Date: 01.21.18
Roger Allen Nelson

One night in Israel I went to a sidewalk bar in a trendy Jerusalem neighborhood with Joe Huizenga, the pastor at Roseland Christian Ministries. The street was lined with night clubs, hookah bars, and coffee shops. There was a joyful buzz as international students and Israeli hipsters were out for late-night revelry.

Joe was wearing a loose-fitting scarf that he bought from a street vendor. The design on the scarf was what you might remember Yasser Arafat wearing. Joe was getting a lot of sideways glances. He was wearing the opposing team's colors. He was wearing a political statement.

An orthodox Jew sauntered up the sidewalk ~ his hands clasped behind his back like a Norwegian speed skater. With a long black coat, a wide brimmed furry hat, the thick beard of a prophet, and long side-curls, it was clear to which team he belonged.

He stopped abruptly in front of our table and blurted out, "What are you doing?"

A little taken aback. Joe replied, "Drinking beer."

"What is this beer you drink?"

Again, a little uncertain, Joe answered, "IPA."

And with that the man erupted, "Why do you want to kill me?"

What followed was a tense exchange between a couple middle-American pastors and what we surmised was a sort of street preacher. Others who passed by intervened and encouraged the man to leave us alone. "The scarf was just fashion..." Young conscripted Israeli men and women with machine guns slung over their shoulders glared. Most everyone kept their eyes down.

At one point the man announced that the temple would be rebuilt in Jerusalem and the reign of God would be made clear. "God will push the infidels into the sea, reclaim our land, and rebuild the temple that he might dwell with his people. Are you with me or against me?"

Are you with me or against me? While we couldn't muster support for that we did toast to *l'chaim* and he let us be. Joe stuffed the scarf into his pocket.

The first temple in Jerusalem was built by Solomon. It housed the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary where God dwelt. That temple was destroyed when the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, about 500 years before Christ. The second temple was completed by Herod the Great. That temple was destroyed when the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem, about 40 years after Christ.

Today all that remains is a section of the foundation.

There are stones that date back to Solomon; there are stones that were part of Herod's rebuild. Other parts of the temple complex still stand as archeological ruins. You can see places where the massive foundation stones are the rubble of stone upon stone. And, on top of these foundational walls sits the Dome of the Rock, the second holiest site in Islam. The temple will not be rebuilt any time soon....

For Hebrews before Jesus,
for Hebrews during Jesus,
for Hebrews after Jesus,
the temple in Jerusalem housed (or symbolized) the very presence of God.
It was the proud center of Jewish of life.
It was sacred ground.

For the Jewish leaders who questioned Jesus,
and for the street preacher outside the bar,
it all begins and ends with the temple.
While God might be everywhere,
to locate God specifically ~ look to the temple.

Where do you look for or locate God?

Let's consider this morning's text.
We jump about 80 miles south from where we left off last week.

As an observant Jew, Jesus joined the thousands upon thousands who made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover. The city was jammed with travelers, Roman military police, street vendors, carnival barkers, hucksters, and beasts of burden. It was crowded and chaotic. It was the nexus of commercial activity, national aspiration, historical memory, architectural splendor, and religious identity. Even during the Roman occupation, Passover in Jerusalem was like Christmas and the Fourth of July all rolled into one ~ in one place.

In the outer-courtyard of the temple, Jesus came upon people selling animals for sacrifice. The more money, the better the sacrifice. The poor bought pigeons. Money-changers were an essential part of the system. It was idolatrous to use Roman coins stamped with the image of the emperor to pay for your sacrifice. Therefore, the currency exchanges weren't there to make change for a twenty; they were an expression of religious purity. You swapped Roman currency for "sanctuary shekels."

The scene was an affront to Jesus.

He improvised a whip, thrashed the animals from the temple, scattered the coffers, overturned tables, and upended the whole apparatus. He disrupted business as usual. If this is where God was located then this was an obscenity. To turn the place of encounter with God into a marketplace was to desecrate the very covenant promises of God. Jesus would have none of it. He made quite a scene.

Karoline Lewis puts it this way:

Jesus is not quibbling about maleficence or mismanagement but calls for a complete dismantling of the entire system. Underneath this critique lies also the intimation that the temple itself is not necessary. At the center of such theological statements is the fundamental question of God's location....

Where do you look for, or locate God?

The disciples were taken aback by Jesus' actions. If John's sequencing of events is accurate, they had just begun to follow Jesus. They weren't quite sure what they had signed-on for....

And yet, they saw such a passion for the things of God that they thought of a line from the psalmist. The zeal that Jesus displayed was both encouraging and inspiring. They felt emboldened. Surely Jesus would lead them to the dwelling of God. Surely this was of God....

The Jewish leaders asked how Jesus claimed the authority to do such a thing.

Who gave him the right to make such a mess?

Who empowered him to throw a wrench into the system?

And, by the way, there is no reason to think that they were trying to corner Jesus. Some of them may have been thankful. They knew the whole thing was an unsavory mess.

Surely this religious racket wasn't what God had in mind. There was a need for things to be set right. There was a need for revolution, or at least reformation. Right?

But Jesus responded with a most bewildering boast.

Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days.

It took generations to build the temple. The claim that it would be destroyed and rebuilt in three days was the height of lunacy. Jesus sounded like a loose-cannon-street-preacher spewing nonsense on a megaphone. Think of someone standing in front of the Twin Towers on September 10. "Destroy these temples and I build them again in three days...."

Dear friends, the story of Jesus clearing the temple courts appears in all four gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke position it as part of what precipitates Jesus' arrest and subsequent execution. It comes at the end of their gospels. But, John puts it at the front. After the poetic prolegomena, the calling of the disciples, and the wedding at Cana, John has Jesus in Jerusalem flipping over tables and raising a ruckus.

It seems unlikely that Jesus did this twice ~ once at the beginning and once at the end of his public life. There must be something else going on here.

What if we come at it this way....

Richard Rohr is a Franciscan priest and the founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico. This retreat center and school is rooted in the gospels, encourages transformation through contemplation, and equips people to be instruments of peaceful change in the world. They name a curricular guiding theme this way:

If God is Trinity and Jesus is the face of God, then it is indeed a benevolent universe. God is not someone to be afraid of, but is the very Ground of Being and is inherently, objectively, and concretely on our side. To trust this is to have faith (which is quite different than going to church or obeying some commandments).

John opens his gospel with the claim that Jesus is the face of God.

Now the Word became flesh and took up residence among us. We saw his glory—the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth, who came from the Father.

The glory of God is not in the temple.

The glory of God is the incarnation.

To quote myself from last week, “The fullness of God in the fullness of humanity.”

God not as an abstraction, or a cosmic force, or an ethereal energy, but God as one of us. God with calloused hands. God with moods. God with gas. God with greasy hair. God with a face.

As Frederick Buechner puts it:

Whoever he was or was not, whoever he thought he was, whoever he has become in the memories of men since and will go on becoming for as long as men remember him—exalted, sentimentalized, debunked, made and remade to the measure of each generation's desire, dread, indifference—he was a man once, whatever else he may have been. And he had a man's face, a human face.

Therefore, if you want to locate God

you can seek in the sanctuary,

you can journey deeper,

you can go to the mountain top,

you can even wait for the temple to be rebuilt,

and chances are that in those places you might even encounter something of God.

But! But, the remarkable claim of the gospels is that God is uniquely embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. The way and will of God is uniquely located in Jesus. There is no longer any need for a temple. Jesus is the temple. Jesus is the very presence of God....

So, while there is no square inch of creation that is outside of God's reach, and God is accessible everywhere, when you encounter Jesus you encounter God.

Richard Rohr makes the case that God took a face so that we could love him. It's difficult to love an abstraction. I like that....

Dear friends, may we seek the face of Jesus and find there the fullness of humanity and the fullness of God. May we come to love Jesus and come to love the fullness of humanity and the fullness of God.

Where do you look for, or locate God?

Amen.