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## God dwells in you

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the Third Sunday in Lent, March 4, 2018*

*John 2:13-25*

When I was growing up in the Baptist church I really thought all other Christians pretty much thought like we did, worshipped like we did, and practiced our faith like we did. I figured they all believed in the Bible literally, they all had communion once a quarter or so from plastic individual cups of grape juice and single serve plastic covered saltine crackers, I thought they all had baptismal tanks about three feet deep in the back of their sanctuaries, etc. I had absolutely no idea how very vast Christianity has been over the centuries and throughout the world, or how very vast it is even within the United States today. I remember speaking with one of my dearest friends, who is a Christian pastor in another denomination, and she told me that we Episcopalians were more “Christo-centric” than her denomination is. And I had to laugh a little – meaning no disrespect to her tradition, but at least for us, Jesus is sort of the deal. We are Christ-ians, after all, even if our experience of what that means changes over time, and our understanding hopefully deepens.

But as I thought some more about it, I wondered: how do we see Jesus, and how much of how we see Jesus relates to the Jesus who is actually portrayed in the Bible? Many of us see Jesus as a great teacher whose way we should follow. Nearly all of us would agree that Jesus taught a way of love, regardless of how well or poorly people who follow him are able to live into that way. As children those of us who grew up going to Sunday School were taught that Jesus loves us, that he forgives our sins, that he died for us. Whether or not anyone said it, it was implied that following the way of Jesus meant being here at church on Sundays, offering our time and talent and treasure to the church, helping out with the Fish Fry and

the trips to Belize and TEC and Sunday School and the altar guild and ushering. By the way the ushers need more volunteers. So these are some of the everyday practical ways we churchgoing followers of the way of Jesus have tried to live into our faith, and that's all well and good.

But the Jesus portrayed in today's gospel text kind of raises our eyebrows. As Deacon Diane read a minute ago, Jesus walks into the temple and throws the place into chaos. He makes a whip and drives out all the animals that had been there for purchase to be sacrificed at the Passover festival. He rudely tips over the tables where people are sitting to make change for purchasing these animals. This is not a "nice" Jesus. He says, Stop making my Father's House a marketplace. This would sort of be like Jesus waltzing into the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome when the Pope is presiding, and tipping over the thurible, making a mess of the altar vestments, wreaking havoc with the acolytes, and upsetting the ushers. Why would he do this?

The thing is, the moneychangers and the animals being sold were there in the Temple legitimately. This was the annual celebration of the Passover, the time when the Jewish people celebrated that God had liberated them from slavery in Egypt many centuries before. In the Jewish scriptures, God commanded the people of Israel to honor the Passover exactly by making these animal sacrifices. So they were all just there doing what the law required of them to be faithful Jews. The Temple itself was the place where God's presence was believed to be concentrated. But Jesus comes in and throws the whole system into turmoil. Stop making my Father's house a marketplace, he says. He should see the Mall of America at Christmastime. Why would he do that? And why would 21<sup>st</sup> century Episcopalians care?

So let me tell you a little about the historical context of this story. John's gospel, where this story comes from, was written after the Temple and the city of Jerusalem had been razed to the ground, several decades after the death of Jesus. Rome and Israel had been increasingly at conflict with one another, and in the year 66, Jews threw Rome out of the city of Jerusalem and set up a Jewish Free

Government in it. Four years later Roman armies put Jerusalem to siege, and finally conquered Jerusalem. They killed and enslaved everyone inside. There was a 4<sup>th</sup> century historian who said that more than a million Jews were killed in the process – and even though modern scholars think this was an exaggeration, the point is that it was a horrific slaughter. After the slaughter, the Romans burned the City and the Temple to the ground. So everyone who survived fled the country. And then in exile, Christianity and Judaism split off from one another over their increasing differences in understanding the law and scripture and Jesus. This in turn made Christians far more vulnerable to religious oppression from Rome, because they were no longer considered Jews. So the Christians for whom the gospel of John was written were in deep trauma. They had lost their homeland. They had lost the Temple, their previous way of practicing their religion and being close to God. They were losing even their identity and community of fellow Jews in exile. They were in trauma.

And into this pain and fear, the gospel of John is assuring them that the God who is made flesh in Jesus is still among them. Jesus' body is the Temple, Jesus is saying. The empire can lay out its worst violence and destroy everything you have held dear, except one thing: the fact of God's presence right here, in the flesh, because of Christ. God dwells, not in any building or any religious tradition, but in people, in physical reality. That is what the "Incarnation" means. Jesus shows us what God is like by turning hundreds of gallons of water into wine at an ordinary wedding. He multiplies scarce resources, like a few loaves and fish, to feed huge numbers of people. He confronts real storms and gives sight to the blind. He helps the disciples who are fishermen find huge numbers of fish. And he raises the dead. So we have life abundantly, to use John's language, because God is right here with us in the flesh, even if everything we've ever known has changed or been destroyed. We bring God with us in our bodies wherever we go, even if our bodies are faulty or aging or sick.

John's gospel is showing you that even when the whole system crumbles around you, God remains with you, closer than you have ever imagined, in your body and in the body of Christ around you in each other, and in front of you in this liturgy

of bread and wine. God has never lived in the Temple, and God has never lived in this building by itself, and God cannot be contained within any religious structure or system, even the most sacred. God lives in the people who come to this building, which is why we say all are welcome here – the inked and the pierced and the old and the young and the tree huggers and the gun owners and the finicky and the sloppy and everyone else – because they are the temple of God, the place where we encounter Christ's presence, in the ordinary people and stuff of life. God is in the teenager listening to music on her iPhone, and in the child playing with his toy cars, and with the Senior Committee planning community unity and luncheons, and with the people sitting quietly in this sanctuary feeling like there is no way they could belong here. Jesus felt so strongly about the need to insist on this that he was willing to be rude in the Temple—because then as now, nearly all of us get it wrong. We are always tempted to believe that God is exclusively met through the beautiful traditions we can control and love. And Jesus saw how desperately we need to continue to experience the presence of God outside this building, in our Monday – Saturday lives.

This doesn't just apply to our lives as individuals. Many of us are looking around at this country, and at the state of the church, feeling that things are changing beyond recognition, and not for the better. In fact I'd say that might be one of the few things we can all agree on. But John's gospel wasn't written for individuals alone; it was written to whole communities who because of the political situation of their times had lost almost everything. Jesus is telling us that no matter what happens in our own time, there is nothing that can eradicate the fact of God's presence with us physically, within us and within everyone we meet. Even if we somehow lost our traditions and our building, we could continue to seek and serve Christ in all persons. In fact we can do that now—we don't have to wait for loss like what the early Christians experienced to understand that God dwells within each one of us, and that that changes everything. This sanctuary and our prayer book and traditions are beautiful, and I do love them. But they can't hold a candle to the God who dwells in each of you.