

Not in Kansas Anymore, John 2:13-22
Lent 3, March 8, 2015
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Almost everyone here knows the iconic film, *Wizard of Oz*. In recent years, a number of spin-offs have hit screen or stage. Think back with me to the original film. Dorothy and her family lived in Kansas – about 1930s I would say. Hard times. Grim life. All this underscored by the fact that it was filmed in black and white. Then a tornado came along, lifting up the house where Dorothy and her dog, Toto, had found shelter. Taken into the eye of the storm, they traveled far, far away until the storm set them down with a bump. And when Dorothy opened the door, she could hardly believe her eyes.

The landscape was different. The people were different. There was a good witch and a bad witch. A tin man, a scarecrow and a lion could talk. A powerful Emperor ruled the land. And it was all in living color. As Dorothy stepped out the door she made the understatement of the world: “Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

Turning to our Gospel lesson, that was the effect of Jesus’ actions and words in the Temple when he chased out the money changers. He created an entirely new landscape in the Jewish community that has implications even for our lives today. What Jesus said and did that day redefined religious life – and set the tone for his own ministry. A keen observer might have said, “We’re not in Kansas anymore.”

Look at what happens: Jesus overturns tables and drives out merchants with a whip. He says, “You have made my Father’s house into a market.” And when the Temple leaders, incensed, demand to know by what right Jesus has done this, he proclaims, “You destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” Outrageous! Of course, *they* didn’t understand at the time, but John tells *us* plainly. Jesus wasn’t talking about a building, but about his body. He’s saying, “*I am* the new Temple.” And that has implications for us, as well as for them.

Well, what *did* it mean for them? The Jews had always thought of the Temple as God’s house, the place where God dwelled. That was David’s purpose as he planned it. David had a house; shouldn’t God? David had a heart to please God; he wanted to build him a dwelling-place. Solomon, who actually built the Temple, wanted a place where God would hear their prayers. “May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day... so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place.” He also built a wall around both Temple and palace, as if to say (to the people he had taxed heavily), “God and I are on real good terms; don’t even *think* of a revolution.” That wall not only protected the king, it also insulated the people, cutting them off from others, until an insider/ outsider mentality developed. There were Jews – the ones who believed in the one true God -- and then there was everyone else, known collectively as the Gentiles. (Inside, outside.)

Over time the Jews identified God specifically with the Temple. As the faithful made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, they would sing songs. They were headed to God’s dwelling-place! They sang,

“Let us go to his dwelling place, let us worship at his footstool.” (Ps 132:7)

And, “I was glad when they said to me, let us go into the house of the Lord.” (Ps 122:1) And when, in the time of Jeremiah, the Temple was destroyed and the people taken into exile, they anguished, “How shall we pray to God in a foreign land?” (Ps 137:4) Because (they thought) God lived in Jerusalem. In their minds, God had become localized to a particular place, a particular people. Where would they find God now that the Temple was gone – and they themselves seemed to be removed from his presence?

But God will not be boxed in. That was never his intention. From the beginning God pushed back. When David proposed a house for God, God almost laughed out loud. “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Could you build me a temple as good as that? Could you build me such a resting place?” (Is 66:1) Solomon may have built a wall around palace and Temple, but God maintained that his would be house of prayer for all peoples. “You who answer prayer, to you all people will come.” (Ps 65:2) From the time of Abraham, the Jews were meant to be a conduit of grace to the world – a nation of priests, ministering God’s presence and power to others (just as the church is meant to be doing today). When Jesus replaced the Temple with himself, God was re-establishing his intentions, now fulfilled in his Son. Jesus is saying, “If you are looking for God, you’ll find him in me. If you want to pray to God, pray in my name.” Jesus is the new Temple.

Jesus not only put himself in the place of the Temple, he also undermined the sacrificial system. The Temple was the place where you went to make sacrifices and to present offerings, following the laws of Moses. Sacrifices were given at every stage and for every event in life. Vendors and money-changers were required to provide the sacrifices (mostly animals, but also grain and oil). Priests were required to carry them out. The Temple became your 1-stop shopping place. Any day, any time, you head to the Temple, buy your sacrifice, offer it at the altar and get it done. Your obligation is fulfilled. Trouble was, with this approach people left unchanged.

Jesus not only overturned the tables, he overturned the entire sacrificial system. He refocused everything on himself. “*I am* the new sacrifice. Your sacrifices are inadequate, obsolete. They were only place-holders anyway, until the Lamb of God would become the ultimate sacrifice, once and for all.” Jesus overturned the tables and took down an entire industry with them. No wonder the Temple leaders were upset. They didn’t understand that Jesus’ entire ministry (his entire life) was about to upset the apple cart. Their old way of doing religion would soon be a thing of the past. Kansas was history.

Jesus upsets the apple cart for you and me as well. So what about you? Have you become comfortable in your religious observance? Is church on Sunday your 1-stop shopping place? Put in your hour, kids in Sunday School, give your offering and you’re good to go? Obligation fulfilled; lives unchanged. // Is your spirituality a transaction? Not exactly 3 goats in exchange for forgiveness, but something like it. I do my part, God does his and we’re square. // And what about “others” – those outside these walls? Does it matter if we share the Good News of Jesus to others? Or have we built walls around our faith that keep other people out? My friends, anything that boxes God in will finally crumble. God is an open door and resists becoming a gated wall. It’s not Kansas anymore.

I recently began reading a book called *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity*. I haven't finished it yet, but I'm intrigued that this true seeker after God found that Islam wasn't the answer, but Jesus is. He discovered that God is found in Christ; that Jesus' sacrifice made all the fasting and pilgrimages (that he had learned since childhood) obsolete. You and I are Christians. We know the Gospel. Are we opening doors to faith? Are we actively breaking down walls to seek the lost? City Team International is participating in a world-wide movement in which the Holy Spirit is converting Muslims to Christianity by the thousands – by exposing them to the Bible and guiding them through it. (See *Miraculous Movements*, by Jerry Trousdale) We could be part of that movement. Just think. What if each one here were to pray for a member of Isis or Al Qaeda? What difference would that make in our world? Jesus is where you find God. Not in a place, but in a person.

My friends, we need to re-think who we are as the church, the Body of Christ. John tells us that it's not about a building / but about Jesus' body. We are the body of Christ -- that's what the Bible tells us. Now, buildings are not bad. As humans we do need a place to gather. We need space where, together, we can honor Jesus as Lord in our lives, hear his word and remember the sacrifice he made for us, once and for all. But we need to be, not only the gathered community, but also the sending community, going out into the world with the message of forgiveness through Jesus, of eternal life freely given by his great sacrifice on the cross. If you are satisfied simply with the gathered community, keeping your faith safe within these walls – you haven't left Kansas yet.

We need to go out and we need to do it *relationally*. People are tired of religion; they want relationship. We start with our relationship with one another, founded on God's relationship with us through Christ. And then we go out – with the support of this community – to build new relationships, drawing others to Jesus, making new disciples. It's a new landscape! It's not church as usual; it's not same old/same old. A new life in Christ takes on hues of living color – new adventures, new relationships.

Pastor Tony Campolo tells of a business trip he made to Hawaii. Being jet-lagged, he woke up at about 3 am and was hungry. So he prowled the streets until he found an all-night diner. Soon he was joined by a crowd he didn't expect: a group of prostitutes who regularly frequented the place as they finished work for the night. There were a lot of rude jokes and embarrassing language, and Tony began to wonder how quickly he could get away.

But before he could do that one of the girls, Agnes, mentioned that her birthday was the next day. The others hooted and hollered, saying maybe they should bake her a cake. Of course, it wasn't a real offer and people just laughed and finally they all went home. But Tony stayed, an idea beginning to take shape. He beckoned to the owner of the diner asking, "Harry, do these girls come here every night?" Yup. Every night 'bout 3 am. "Well, what about that girl that was sitting next to me – Agnes? Does she always come?" Always comes. Never fails. "Well, what if we gave her a birthday party tomorrow? You make a cake and I'll bring the decorations. What do you say?" And Harry thought maybe that would be ok.

So the next night when the girls returned they found the place all decorated with balloons and signs and a cake with the message, "Happy birthday, Agnes." It wasn't perfect; Harry wasn't

used to decorating cakes and her name sort of ran over the side. They sang happy birthday to an awestruck Agnes and then asked her to cut the cake.

But Agnes was still overcome. She stuttered and started and finally blurted out, “Harry, you mind if I just took the cake home? Ain’t nobody ever made me a cake before. I just want to look at it. Is that ok?” And without waiting for an answer, she took the cake and left.

Everyone just sat there, stunned. (Party over, right? No cake, no birthday girl.) No one quite knew what to say, so Tony said, “Can I offer a prayer?” And so he did, asking God to protect Agnes, to change her life, to give her a chance to know Jesus. Tony finished his prayer and people said goodbye and left.

But Harry said, “Hey! You never told me you were no preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?” And Tony said, “I belong to the kind of church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3 in the morning.”

Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, "Nah. I don't believe it. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!"

My friends, what kind of church are we, at St Timothy's? Because Jesus changes everything. He totally redefines the spiritual landscape, and we – as his followers – are not in Kansas anymore. God isn't defined by a place but by a person, and his name is Jesus. Jesus is *the* sacrifice for sin – we can't make an offering big enough, or good enough. Only Jesus could do it. And then he makes us a community of grace and love, shaped and identified by the cross. My friends – Jesus has come to overturn the old and obsolete, in order to do a new thing in your life. Why stay in Kansas, living in black and white – when you can live in Christ, in vibrant and living color? Amen.