

John 2:13-22

2:13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

2:14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

2:15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.

2:16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

2:17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

2:18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?"

2:19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

2:20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?"

2:21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

2:22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

In 1977, George Burns, then 81, played the role of God in the Carl Reiner-directed film *Oh God!* It's a classic movie with a star-studded cast: John Denver, Teri Garr, Dinah Shore to name a few. And it's funny, God, portrayed by Burns, doesn't seem as old to me now as he did when I was a kid. God's even young enough to run for president!

And I do have to admit, I wouldn't be overly disappointed to hear a response to one of my deepest prayers met with Burns' gravelly voice and a clever one-liner. I'll pass on the cigar, at least a lit one. Smoke is not really my thing. But if God wants offer a "say good night, Gracie" before the Amen, that'd be just fine with me, too.

Other films have adapted a similar theme. *Bruce Almighty*, and later *Evan Almighty*, gave us the Morgan Freeman God, dressed in a flowing white tunic, and doing a happy dance. And in *Dogma*, we get the Alanis Morissette God, dressed in a white tuxedo and top hat, and she's really playful! God becomes something we can conjure.

One of my favorite lines in *Oh God!* is when God meets John Denver's character, Jerry Landers, a supermarket clerk chosen to share God's message. Their initial meeting is an interview. God opts for the *Charlie's Angels* approach to communications. The meeting happens in an empty room with only a chair and a speaker phone. Jerry asks God all sorts of questions, but he's particularly interested in God's appearance. "What gives, man? Why the intercom? Why just the voice," Jerry asks.

God's response, delivered as only Burns could: "I don't like to brag, but if I appeared to you just as God—how I really am, what I really am—your mind couldn't grasp it."

Your mind couldn't grasp God. *Couldn't.*

When we read John's Gospel, we hear tales of a world that not only couldn't grasp God's presence, but also wouldn't grasp God's presence.

Let's start with the *couldn't*, because I believe context is crucial in interpreting this morning's lection.

The earliest Jesus followers, that's the disciples and extended friends who accompanied the historical Jesus, as well as those who lived in the three centuries following Jesus' death, were rooted in Judaism. They were faithful Jewish people who believed that the life of Jesus had significant import on the trajectory of God in the world – specifically, that Jesus was Messiah. And that through Jesus, humanity would find commune with their Creator.

Therefore, any person of Jewish faith in First Century Palestine, whether connected to Jesus or not, would have been steeped in the Temple Cult. The Temple, its customs, rituals, hierarchy, leaders, presence – everything about it – the Temple was central to the God experience. And the Temple was the exclusive access to God. It was not only where God lived, but it was also believed to be the only place where God could be experienced in a safe and comprehensible way.

Think back to the Exodus story. God is SO powerful that God's voice is an earthquake, and God's light is brighter than the sun. To look upon God, to hear God is an impossibility – it will literally kill you. Even Moses isn't unchanged – he transfigures in every encounter.

Over the years, an entire process of purity rituals is created to ensure God's people approach God with the reverence and relevance necessary to be in community with God's presence. The Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle, and eventually the Jerusalem Temple with its

circles of holiness, are all constructed to allow for God's presence amongst God's people.

God and the Temple are intertwined.

Now, remember, the author of John isn't a field reporter. This person most likely lived about hundred years after the death of Jesus. Palestine isn't a place you want to be a hundred years into the common era. Rome not only occupies Palestine, but it has sacked Jerusalem, and the Temple is in ruins. The connective tissue between God and humanity has been severed. The portal has closed up. The Flux Capacitor is broken!

Think back to the psalmist in Babylon who tormented by his captors, laid down his harp, asking, "How can we sing our songs in a foreign land?"

This is the *couldn't* of our story. John's community lives in a time where people believed that the Temple was the only place one could grasp God's presence. With the Temple gone, even if they wanted to access God's presence, there was no way they could. And how do you preach hope in a world of could-of-been?

Now comes the *wouldn't*. John's gospel tells us that the Word – that is the substance of God – the Word, which was present with God, even before Creation, and proclaimed in Proverbs by Lady Wisdom; the Word which moved people of faith in countless ways throughout the generations; this Word, this umph of God, came for a time, and lived among us. God experienced the world as Jesus, a human being made just like us, who felt, and lived, and loved, and laughed, and grieved, and spilled coffee on his shirt, and blushed, and felt scared, and yelled

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at the basketball game, and did cartwheels with children in the neighborhood, and ate too many deviled eggs at the potluck, and did all the human stuff just like you and me. John tells us that God was here. God is here. God's gonna keep on being here.

But the world wouldn't grasp God's presence. The world doesn't grasp God's presence.

Here's what I think is fascinating about today's table-turning episode. In the other gospels, Jesus disrupts activities, offers provocative words, and rearranges the Temple furniture during his last week of life. It's his last act of protest, his last statement about the systemic abuses of the religious establishment. And it becomes the last straw for the authorities. At this point, a trial is imminent.

But when I read about this event in other gospels, it always feels to me like a come-to-Jesus moment (a strange thing to say about Jesus!). Jesus has reached his limit. He will not be silent in the face of audacity and absurdity. The bear has been poked. The button has been pushed. "I don't care how much we paid for it, and how bad you wanted to go to Disney world, we're turning this car around, kiddos!"

In John's gospel, yes, this is a moment of turning tables, but it's also a turntable moment. For our younger congregants, a turntable is a record-player, and preferably, you want to have two turntables and a microphone to get your message across. Google it. Trust me! Anyway, a turntable repeats a message. Over and over again.

Jesus's stunt in today's text isn't an angry, exasperated reaction. I would argue that it's his first album drop. It is a brilliant, artistic action. It's his signal to the world that he's going to be a disruptor. God doesn't have

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to be constrained to what we can grasp. It's all right there in God's name: "I am who I am; I'm gonna be who I'm gonna be!"

In Luke's gospel, Jesus announces his ministry by reading Isaiah's scroll. "I'm bringing liberty to the captives," Jesus says. And his ministry is expressed in the dismantling of systems. Unlikely people, marginalized people, forgotten people write a newer, better story. "My soul magnifies the Lord," Mary says. "All that is mine, is yours," a grieving daddy says to two sons separated from him by all this systemic muck.

John's gospel is certainly a political expression. But I believe in this gospel, Jesus is much more interested in liberating our minds to new possibilities than he is in reworking or revamping our systems. Jesus invites us to see the world through a new lens. One day, and one day soon, we're gonna worship this God of ours in truth and spirit.

God isn't housed in a place, God is housed in humanity. And in communion with Jesus, one will find God's presence. Birth and bread, deep wells, new sight, even new life, are of the Spirit. Jesus has spent long enough living in a world consumed by form. He'll advocate for a world of function freed to be expressed in fluid and mysterious ways. This isn't a capital campaign to reconstruct a building. This is about one person living so fully and wholly, so consistently with how they were created to be, that God's power and potential are resurrected and renewed in every person thereafter.

Here's the tricky thing about John's gospel. If we read it too quickly, it can sound like an indictment of Judaism, and too often, and too tragically, it's been used that way. This gospel is not an indictment. Nor is it a proclamation of an exceptional and exclusive Christian faith.

For starters, Christianity didn't yet exist when this gospel was written. I believe the gospel is a more general indictment of the way humanity allows its systems to blind/shield itself from God's presence and God's truth. It's not that the infrastructure was bad. It's that the people spent so much time focusing on maintaining the infrastructure that they failed to recognize God in their midst. Yes, get ready for Passover. Yes, get the rituals right. But don't forget the reasoning behind it.

Two thousand years later, history doesn't remember an hour-long glitch in the productivity of the Temple economy. I'm sure they straightened the tables and collected the missing animals. And found some club soda to get the Welch's out of the carpet. History remembers the audacity of an organization that failed to remember its purpose, and failed to recognize God in its presence.

I think that's the takeaway for us this morning. In this season of Lent, a season of discernment, and focus, and intentional practice, what prevents us from experiencing the presence of the Holy One?

Why must we insist that God can only be grasped, can only be manifested in the neat and tidy places, before the candles burn out, somewhere in between the sermon and the prelude, in plenty of time for us to still make it to the K-Dub for lunch, ordered, tamed even, in all those comfortable rituals? And while we spent our time inspecting the bulletin for typos or making sure those banners kept pristine angles, we missed the God who narrated like Morgan Freeman, dropped one-liners like George Burns, and who like Alanis Morissette was so creative, She could write a hit song about irony that wasn't even ironic – I'd say unfortunate!

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John tells us God gave us something we could grasp: Jesus. We needn't hide our eyes nor close our ears. We needn't walk through the doors of a grand temple. We need only believe. For there is living water, and living bread, and new life, and light, and a Spirit steeped in truth and love.

Good friends, may we, today, cease our desire to litigate the source of God, and instead resume our intent to celebrate God's resourcefulness in being present among us. And if we are feeling especially bold, may we, like Jesus, dare to be God's presence to, with, and for one another.

Amen.