

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on March 7, 2021 (3 Lent, Year B)

It's hard to imagine, but tomorrow marks the one-year anniversary of our last in-person service here at St. John's. It was the Second Sunday in Lent and we knew *something* was up. I'd sent out a communication about just waving to one another at the Peace and not shaking hands after the service. We used a lot of Purell and offered communion in just bread form, withholding the chalice. From the perspective of living the last year in the midst of a global pandemic, it all seems so quaint and naive.

None of us owned masks, most of us thought Zoom was a PBS show for kids that came on right after The Electric Company, and we hadn't even started hoarding toilet paper. On Friday of the following week, we made the decision to go fully remote and I even texted the bishop for permission to do so — we were the first parish in the diocese to shut everything down. And on Sunday, Jack and I were live-streaming from the chapel, mostly because that's where we could get the strongest signal.

Well, here we are. Still fully remote one year later. With hope on the horizon, but still committed to keeping one another safe by gathering online and being together spiritually while staying apart physically.

This morning we hear the story of Jesus flipping tables in the Temple. And just as those tables were overturned, many of our preconceived and deeply held notions about how to do and be the church have been flipped over as well during the past 12 months. We've realized that we can be the Body of Christ in new ways. We've learned that as much as we love and cherish our sacred space, we can stay connected to God and one another without it. We've seen that a temporary fast from Communion is hard, but we've learned to be fed in new ways.

But the thing about the Temple in the ancient world is that it was always more than just a building. It was God's dwelling place. It was a tangible, brick-and-mortar sign of the covenant between God and God's people; an external symbol of the eternal promise of divine relationship. If you asked the average person on the street where God could be found, they'd point to that massive structure and say, 'Right there.'

And indeed the Temple housed the Ark of the Covenant, the very symbol of God's presence, which traveled with the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness with Moses for 40 years. Once they had a permanent location to house the Ark — which held the original tablets containing the 10 Commandments, which we also heard this morning — the Temple was built, and it served as the literal House of God for generations. The point is, it was impossible to imagine worshiping God without the Temple. It was *that* important to religious identity and *that* central to the community of faith.

What riled Jesus was that corruption had crept into the Temple system. For some, faith had become transactional rather than transformative; money and preserving the institution became more important than divine relationship and living out God's commandments in the world. The system of Temple sacrifice, originally intended to draw people to God, had become a precursor to the indulgences of the Middle Ages. And few things angered Jesus more than the hypocrisy of faith leaders preying on the vulnerable in the name of God.

In keeping with this passage, I'd argue that much of what Jesus came into the world to do was to flip traditional assumptions. Assumptions about power and privilege; assumptions about who matters and who does not; assumptions about who is blessed and who is cursed; assumptions about how relationship with God is accessed.

Jesus looks at all of the traditional assumptions and turns the entire system upside down. The cleansing of the Temple is simply a physical manifestation of this. For those who are a little slow to understand metaphor, Jesus puts on a show, embodying what it means to literally flip things over. And in this context, it makes sense. We hear John's version of this story this morning, which comes at the beginning of his ministry, setting the tone for what is to come. In the other gospel accounts, the story takes place at the end. When time was getting short. As Jesus' impending arrest was just days away. Either way, and maybe it happened twice, in trying to get people's attention, sometimes theatrics speak louder than parables; sometimes bold action moves people more than sermons. I'm sure nobody who was there, ever forgot that moment when tables and chairs and coins and pigeons all started flying through the air.

But the other thing about the Temple is something that relates very clearly to our situation over the past year. As long as you have your faith, a physical place to worship is less important. Cherished, certainly. Missed, of course. Especially as a gathering place to see people we all dearly love.

In one of his early Passion predictions, which we hear after the table flipping, Jesus invites those around him to gaze upon the majesty of the Temple. And he says, "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up." They take him literally and are like, "Yeah, okay, Jesus. It took 46 years to build this thing and you're going raise it in three days? Good luck with that." But of course Jesus is talking about his Resurrection. He's talking about his own body, crucified and risen, serving as the object of adoration and worship; his own body as the Temple; his own body as the entry point to relationship with God.

This is a radical reimagining of relationship with God. Jesus is making the point that God is not a building or a sacrificial system or a doctrine or even a book. God is not found exclusively on a mountain or in a set of scrolls or in a building. God is found in the person of Jesus Christ, in the Temple that is his body. When we gaze upon Jesus, we gaze upon God; when we worship Jesus, we worship God.

This was a stunning, table-flipping new understanding of God's presence in the world. And that's where this all comes back to our present day. Because through this pandemic, we too, have had our understanding of what it means to be the church, flipped on its head. Yes, it's taken a global health crisis, rather than the flipping of tables, to shake us out of old routines and imagine the possibilities of being St. John's in new ways.

But the reality is that because we worship Jesus, we can do that anywhere in any form in any place. That's what we have been doing this past year in ways that we have never done before. By necessity, that's what we have learned to do. And as hard as it's been, as much as we have given up through the loss of embodied community throughout this season, that's an important lesson about what it means to follow Jesus. We don't have to come here physically to be present spiritually.

Now, I know the prospect of journeying through yet another Holy Week and Easter online is tough. Personally, I've had thoughts like "Maybe we should just show re-runs." But that's not what this is all about. We can do this and we will do this. And while we are getting closer to regathering in person in some form, we are not quite there yet.

It's been a long year, a hard year. But I give thanks everyday for this extended community of faith. For your faithfulness, your patience, your forbearance, your love, and your willingness to persevere when everything around you has been flipped over. That's the essence of faith. And it remains a privilege to continue along this journey with each and every one of you.

The Rev. Tim Schenck
Rector, St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church
Hingham, Massachusetts
[Church Website](#)
Blog: [Clergy Confidential](#)
Twitter: [@FatherTim](#)
[Facebook Page](#)
[Lent Madness](#)
[Amazon Author Page](#)