

# Sermon for Sunday, March 7, 2021 - "Zeal for Justice and Holiness"

Third Sunday in Lent  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

"Pastor Amy, I need to talk to you." I turned to see one of Good Shepherd's youngest members. She was waiting with a sense of some urgency after one of the outdoor communion services last summer. I knelt down to look this four-year old in the eye and I saw some tears there. "Pastor Amy," she said with passion, "I miss inside church." "Oh, I know," I said, "I do, too." This smart and feisty girl was quick to respond. "Yes, but you get to be inside every week. Why can't we? I see you there when we watch church. I want to be there with you."

I learned later that this young member had gone inside to use the restroom after worship. She then ran out of the restroom and down the hall towards the sanctuary. When she got to the entrance, the sight brought her to a screeching halt. She just stood there staring at the empty space that should have been full of people and music and prayers. She ran from there to share her pain and frustration with me.

This encounter reminds me of another one of our young ones, a two-year old boy. He was on a walk down Iowa Avenue with his parents last spring. As they approached Good Shepherd's building, this little boy ran to the doors and pulled on them crying, "Open, open, let's go in."

These two children, with their strong emotions and their zeal for this house of worship, have so much to teach us about following Jesus and being church.

White mainline Christians don't often display strong emotions at church. We often get the message that church involves being nice and polite and controlled, sitting quietly, not making a fuss. There's especially a lot of discomfort around the emotion of anger. It does sometimes erupt in meetings and life together, but it's often judged as sinful and wrong.

White mainline American Christians also are not usually known for zeal about gathering for worship. African Lutherans often walk for miles to get to worship services that last for hours, but we tend to worship when it is convenient, when it works for us, if we get something out of it. Worship here has a transactional, marketplace feel. Life in the US means we can shop around for a congregation that meets our needs, that feels comfortable, that won't challenge us too much. Yet we follow Jesus! Jesus who is full of passion and zeal! Our Gospel story today is one of the most extreme examples of Jesus' passion, but he is rarely the "gentle Jesus meek and mild" that is often pictured in stained glass windows.

Jesus challenges his disciples - remember last week when he called Peter Satan? He provokes the religious leaders. He disrupts the status quo. He loses patience with the way God's house has become a marketplace and with the whole system of transactional worship through the offering of sacrifices.

As author Debie Thomas puts it, “Jesus is a disruptor. A leveller. An upender. As his disciples immediately realize when he throws out the moneychangers and occupies the temple, *zeal* is what animates the Messiah. Fervor, not casualness. Depths, not surfaces. He will not tolerate the desecration of his Father’s house. He is not impressed by ‘marketplace’ faith . . . Jesus interrupts ‘business as usual’ . . . he interrupts *worship* as usual for the sake of justice and holiness. His love for God, the temple, and its people compels him to righteous anger.”<sup>1</sup> (*end quote*)

Sometimes it can be good for God’s people to be disrupted. Over the past 12 months, church business as usual, worship as usual, have been mightily disrupted, and that is not all bad. Comparing our disruptions to Jesus in the temple is not to say that God caused all the challenges to the church this year. Rather it is to say that God can work through these disruptions to interrupt our casualness and complacency, to create more passion and zeal within us, to deepen justice and holiness.

This year, this congregation has grown in our zeal for this house of worship as we’ve longed to gather together in this sanctuary. Yet we’ve also chosen to not be complacent or comfortable in the face of the virus. We’ve done what is hard in order to honor the body of Christ and all bodies as we’ve refrained from gathering to prevent the spread of the virus. We’ve learned how to worship in new ways that have served more people. I give thanks for how we’ve responded to these disruptions.

I also hope that once it’s safe to reopen, we won’t be complacent about gathering for worship. I pray we’ll prioritize coming together in this holy place. Or, if you live far from here that you go to another holy place. We will need to continue to use technology to reach out and to bring worship to the homes of those whose health prevents them from gathering. Yet we also need to keep inviting and encouraging one another to gather for worship.

Certainly, God cannot be contained in buildings. In this Gospel passage today, Jesus makes it clear that the presence of God dwells most fully now in his body rather than in the temple. Yet in gathering for worship, we are putting our own bodies in a place where it’s harder to tune out God’s disruptive, transformative word, where we can most fully receive Christ’s body in holy communion, where it’s harder to ignore the needs of other bodies. All this means that when we gather for worship, we are putting our bodies in a place where we can be more fully formed into the body of Christ. Once it is safe to do so, we need to move out of our comfort zones and back into holy sanctuaries.

This disruptive year has also evoked and revealed many emotions within us - grief, fear, anger. I pray that we will make room for all these emotions when we gather again for worship, that we will not simply be nice and polite and quiet. Our emotions are a gift from God and God can work through them to shape us into more passionate followers of Jesus, more zealous advocates of God’s justice. One of the gifts of gathering for worship is being with children and people with special needs who are often much more free with their emotions. We need to hear their cries, listen to their shouts, and watch them move to help us work with our emotions.

Emotions can be scary, anger can feel really scary right now, especially given our polarized political climate. How do we discern if our anger is righteous or self-serving, a force for justice, or harmful to the body of Christ and the body politic? We bring it to God in worship, we pray with it using the psalms of lament that are full of anger, we acknowledge it within the body of Christ. In her influential essay, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love,” Beverly Harrison writes: “The important point is that where feeling

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas, Debie. “Not in God’s House.” *Journey With Jesus*, 28 February 2021. [journeywithjesus.net](http://journeywithjesus.net)

is evaded, where anger is hidden or goes unattended, masking itself, there the power of love, the power to act, to deepen relation, atrophies and dies.”<sup>2</sup>

Anger can be a powerful tool, a force for good and for evil. Bringing our anger to worship opens us to God who can work with and through it.

Beloved of God, we have been disrupted this year.

God is working through these disruptions. God will continue to work.

God meets you today in your body, with all your emotions, to draw you into worship and into the body of Christ.

God meets you to transform you into a passionate, zealous advocate of God’s justice.

Let’s take a moment for silent prayer.

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<sup>2</sup> Harrison, Beverly. “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love.” *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*. Beacon Press, 1986, pp. 3-21.

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<sup>2</sup> Beverly Harrison “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love.” From *Making the Connection: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*. Beacon Press. September 1, 1986.