



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

A PASSION FOR GOD

Exodus 19:1-17; John 2:13-22

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The title of today's sermon, "A Passion for God," causes me some anxiety. I don't usually pay much attention to titles. As preachers, we are trained to think of the text, the theme, and the application - not so much the title. It is the word "passion" that concerns me. Does talking in the church about passion make you a bit uncomfortable? In a culture that is fixated on sex and in a church that struggles to develop an adequate theology of human sexuality, we have a hard time knowing what passion is all about. As Presbyterians, we say that we do everything "decently and in order." Where does passion fit into the practice of our faith?

The word "passion" makes us uneasy for another reason. There is so much religious and political fanaticism that we are skeptical about any displays of passion in our society. We are afraid of the emotions that demagogues stir up in their followers. Such passion can lead people, in the name of God or politics, to deny the rights of others to worship, demean those who disagree with them, and even insight violence against individuals or groups they despise. We have seen how religious passion can be manipulated to promote racism, abuse women, and empower suicide bombers. William Butler Yeats, in his poem "The Second Coming," describes our time this way: "The best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity." To think that someone could kill another in the name of God should make us think twice about religious passion.

Yet, the Bible speaks to us about God – whose passionate love for us evokes an equally passionate response. God's heart breaks for the Hebrews slaves in Egypt. When God can bear it no longer, God calls Moses to lead the people out of bondage into freedom. This loving God gives Moses strong and passionate words to use to free the people. Out in the wilderness, God calls Moses to come up the mountain. The Lord gives Moses the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone. Did you hear how they begin? The Ten Commandments begin with a prologue that speaks of God's loving act of deliverance. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; now, therefore, you shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:2,3). When the commandments are given, God expects the people to keep the commandments with the same passionate commitment that God offers them. They are to worship God alone, live with integrity, and practice justice. The commandments lead the people away from all that devalues, demeans, and destroys life. They are to live with a God-affirming and life-affirming passion.

The life of Jesus is marked by a holy passion for God. In John's gospel, Jesus walks onto the temple grounds, makes a whip of cords, and launches an attack. He drives the money changers and the animal sellers out of the temple; he overturns the tables and spills the money on the ground. Jesus starts a riot in the house of God for the sake of God. When the disciples remember this

event, Psalm 69 comes to their minds: "Zeal for your house will consume me." The word "zeal" comes from a Greek root that means to boil. On that day in the temple, Jesus was boiling hot for God.

We have a hard time thinking of Jesus as a man of passion. We prefer to think of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." We forget that Jesus is a tiger. We have difficulty seeing in him the same hopes, fears, desires, joys, and sorrows that stir our souls. We say that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. Therefore, just as he shares a divine life with God, so he shares a human life with us. Jesus has the same needs and faces the same temptations we do. Jesus is a man who loves his friends, rails at injustice, finds joy in simple things, has compassion for outcasts, stands up to angry mobs, and endures torture because of his passionate love for God.

In John, the story of the cleansing of the temple is placed near the beginning of the gospel. The other three gospel writers place this story in the last week of his life. By placing the story at the beginning of the gospel, John tells us from the beginning that Jesus will bring about sweeping change, a new understanding of faith, and a new experience of God. Jesus says that God's house is no longer a holy place but has become a place of business. Those who traffic in the paraphernalia of religion, but not religion's true heart, are driven out. Jesus says, "Destroy this temple and

in three days I will raise it up." Thinking that Jesus is speaking of Herod's temple, the leaders misunderstand. Jesus is speaking of his own life, death, and resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus will be the sign that vindicates the passionate faith that Jesus proclaims. He is the temple of the Lord. Through him and in him we come to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Have you ever thought about the Biblical truth that each one of us is a temple of the Lord? Paul writes to the Corinthians, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Cor. 3:16). Paul writes to the Galatians, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). Have we become so tame in our faith, so lacking in passion, so trafficking in religious paraphernalia, and so conventional that we no longer bear, deep within our hearts, this passion for God? Presbyterians have jokingly been referred to as "God's frozen chosen" because of our historic rationality and disdain for strong emotion. Where do we show our zeal for the Lord? Tepid, lukewarm Christianity is nauseating. Are we not the body of Christ, and therefore, the temple of the Holy Spirit? Are we not more than a marketplace where people trade in the baubles of religion, hide moral failure behind the thin veneer of piety, and bless the status quo? Maybe it is time for a clean sweep – time for the Lord to drive out of us all that stands between us and God. It is time to cleanse the temple of our heart, mind, body, and soul and be filled with a passionate love for God.

I believe there burns in the heart of this congregation a true passion for God. This passion for God does not make us irrational, sentimental, or trivial, but wise, tough, and full of zeal. When we are full of passion for God, we are not easily swayed by every new trend that blows through town; we are single-minded in our dedication to fulfill the purposes of God. True passion does not make us intolerant of others but helps us see God – even in those with whom we disagree. We often think of John Calvin, the father of our Reformed faith, as a severe intellectual and cold man. This caricature of Calvin ignores his passionate convictions, the warmth of his heart, and his loving spirit. We forget that the image on Calvin's seal is the hand of God holding out a flaming heart.

I see this passion in your hearts. I see the flame of spiritual passion in those who are involved in our Stephen Ministry and in our new Reply All Ministry. I see this in our on-line small groups, our Weekday School, and in our Confirmation Class. I see it as we feed the hungry, build houses for Habitat, and provide for the needs of orphan children in Lesotho. Sometimes, all it takes is for the Holy Spirit to make a clean sweep of things and set our hearts on fire with a passion for God.

A member of the congregation I served in Norfolk told me that his spiritual life was dead. He went through the motions of the Christian life; but there was no fire in the altar of his heart. I urged him to do two things: get involved in a need beyond himself and spend time each day praying, reading the Bible, and listening for God. He began to volunteer at a hospitality house for

seamen who came to Norfolk on cargo ships from around the world. For a month, nothing changed. Two months passed. Three months. Then, I noticed a new spark of life in him. He cared deeply for the seamen so far from home. He began to connect what he read in the Bible and experienced in prayer with his work at the hospitality house and in his relationships with others. God lit a fire of holy passion in his heart.

Here at this table our hearts are renewed, our minds refreshed, and our passion purified. Here as we feast upon bread and wine, we commune with the Risen Lord and with one another. Here God sweeps us clean and lights a fire in our hearts. Together as the body of Christ, we become the temple of the Lord.