

Tending Wisdom
Third Sunday in Lent
March 8, 2015
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Text: John 2
I Corinthians 1

Alright, a little Bible quiz for you: pay attention and see if you can get this right – it’s a multiple choice question, so at least you have a chance: Which of these images about God is NOT found in the Bible?

- a. “The Lord is my Shepherd”
- b. “The Lord is my light and my salvation”
- c. “The Lord is my rock and my fortress”
- d. “The Lord is my overturner”

If your answer is “d” then you are correct – well done! – you get a gold star! ‘Shepherd, light, salvation, rock, fortress’...all images used in Scripture for God – those images are found in the Psalms, and I would say that these images too are found directly or indirectly in the Gospels to describe Jesus – particularly in the image-rich Gospel of John; images that have abided deeply in the faithful. “The Lord is my overturner”? – that does not find its way into the poetry of the Psalms; especially since I’m making up the word “Overturner” – “The Lord is my overturner” – not a treasured touchstone of faith. But – I want to take issue with my Bible quiz today: I want to tip my hand right at the start of this sermon to say that I’d like us to take a look at that image “The Lord is my overturner” and see what it might mean as an image for God and as a touchstone of faith for us: “The Lord is my overturner”

You may have noticed where I got this idea - it’s in the Gospel story from John that Jesus does some overturning in the courts of the temple:
The Passover was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.¹⁴In the temple Jesus found people selling animals and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making a whip of cords, Jesus drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. Jesus also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.

Jesus is angry – passionate – aggressive; in John’s telling of the story, Jesus even takes a whip in his hands. I think it’s fair to say that such is not the typical image of Jesus that is portrayed or that we turn too: shepherd, light, rock – yes; flipping and whipping in the temple – no.

So – what do we make of this? Well, how about if we look at it like a parable? And what I mean by that is not that it's one of the stories Jesus tells, as engaging as such stories can be; what I mean is that a very helpful approach to a parable can be to try to enter into the story from multiple perspectives, multiple characters, to see what views open up as you do so – views into self and others and God – and so what if we do that with this story from John? ...see what the story looks and feels like from different perspectives, characters, within it...and all connected to and impacted by the overturning that is going on in different ways.

So first, how about if we take on the role of the merchants and moneychangers? - these are the bad guys, apparently, so let's explore the role of the villain – that can be kind of intriguing to do. Except, if you look at what these folks are doing, it's hard to villainize them much. These folks were part of the temple system that allowed the faithful to carry out their religious obligations – they're making available what was necessary for offering to God an expression of faith. Was there some shady dealing going on? – perhaps, probably – such things do happen; although unlike the other Gospels, we don't hear Jesus condemning a “den of robbers” - in John what we hear is: “Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!” – Jesus flips and whips at the whole operation – overturns OUR operation – this is us, remember? – here we are just trying to make our way, and Jesus charges in to make a mess of everything. I'm starting to feel sorry for us villains.

So let me tell you why I think it's important to try on this perspective in the story for a while. One very important thing it does is keep us from seeing this story as only being about someone else: this story has sometimes simply been used by Christians as being about Jesus overturning Judaism, so we stand at a self-righteous distance and watch the cleansing; and perhaps using the term “cleansing” makes it clear just how harmful such a perspective can be. Instead if we take our place there in the story, we can see and understand that what is often the case is that people are indeed just a part of systems, of an establishment, that carries on with its own kind of momentum, its own life, really – for good or for ill? – well, that's often beside the point – it's just the way it is. So I can empathize with these villains – these merchants; I can empathize with the religious establishment they represent and who are so horrified by what Jesus does; I can have

sympathy that these are people just trying to carry out life and faith as best they can. And, standing here in the story, I can also see that Jesus overturns such things – that Jesus does so in me; in us; in our faith; in our world. It’s important to understand this place in the story, but to do so is to understand that Jesus may not villainize but he also does not compromise – Jesus is an overturner. It seems that part of the very nature of religion, of faith, of life, is that patterns and practices turn far too easily into ruts and requirements. Jesus is portrayed here in passion and anger because there is something essential at stake: the temptation for religion to be merely about ritual and not about relationship with the living God; for faith to be merely about obligation and not about the freedom and call to live in gratitude and service. Stand in this story and have it be about you – what needs to be overturned in your faith? in your life? in your heart? – what is Jesus overturning to make way for something more genuine, enduring, life-giving. Stand together in this story and ask – what needs to be overturned in us as a community of faith, as Christians, as a congregation, denomination? – what is Jesus overturning to clear a path to more faithful following?

That’s one view into, within the story. But I thought of another one too – one that isn’t mentioned here. I wonder about the people watching what was going on. Actually we know that Jesus’ disciples were taking this all in and that the Jewish religious leaders were watching too – but I’m wondering about others. I’m wondering about people who didn’t fit into this temple system – some people didn’t have enough money to navigate this religious marketplace so they didn’t count in the same way as others. And something interesting too: in the temple, it seems that this was the “court of the Gentiles” in which this religious marketplace was happening – Gentiles were already kept on the margins, but even the one place they do have to pray and worship is taken over too by the establishment. So what’s it like for you to be one of them – someone on the outside? – kept on the margins; and then to see Jesus overturning – Jesus upending that which keeps you diminished? Perhaps you know that place – in your life story a place of being marginalized, of being hurt, oppressed, abused, victimized; or perhaps even a place caught in a harmful behavior or addiction or illness – in such places “the Lord is my overturner” strikes a powerful chord – the passion of Jesus proclaims a different story for those caught in systems of diminishment. Perhaps you know

that place less – but you now see Jesus as one who brings hope to such circumstances. What is Jesus overturning for you? for us? for others?

That's 2 views from within the story, and I'd like to try 1 more – the place of Jesus. And this is a particularly dangerous place, I think – to take on the righteous anger, confrontation, overturning of Jesus as our own – that's hard to do without being SELF-righteous, judgmental, overzealous. Religion far too often and easily takes on the role of God's overturning power, and the results can be harmful, violent, in ways small and great, past and present. But that danger is a caution, not a dead-end – as the body of Christ we ARE given a prophetic role that speaks truth to power, that overturns what keeps people from God and the fullness of life God gives, that drives out what would keep God's children from relationship with their Maker. We step into that place in the story, into that role in faith – standing up to the powers that be. What word of God do we need to speak that overturns oppression, that expresses the passion of God for justice and wholeness?

We've entered into this story from 3 perspectives –and with those roles, those places, all held together within us, listen to this:

Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Can you hear in that: “The Lord is my overturner”? In Christ, the established ways and powers of the world are challenged, overturned by the wisdom that is made flesh in the Lord of life – overturning all that stands in the way of God's ways of life. The wisdom of faith is to see God overturning in you, for you, through you -in others, for others, through others – to then build up the true life God intends.

Alright, let's try this Bible quiz again: pay attention and see if you can get it right again - multiple choice: which, if any, of these images about God IS found in the Bible?

- a. “The Lord is my Shepherd”
- b. “The Lord is my light and my salvation”
- c. “The Lord is my rock and my fortress”
- d. “The Lord is my overturner”

The way of wisdom says, the correct answer is “e”, all of the above. Thanks be to God. AMEN.