

## REFLECTION

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### John 2:13-22

*The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple...*

*Our Task is not to resist the future but to help shape it.*

A. Toffler, *Future Shock* (1970)

Did you see Pope Francis on the news this weekend? He made a pilgrimage to the *cradle of civilization*, the ancient Mesopotamia, now present-day Iraq— which is scarred by extreme hardship, three decades of despotic rule, and nearly two decades of war and devastation. What caught my eye was how he was physically struggling as he got off the plane in Baghdad. He was bent over, his white robes dragging as he limped. He seemed to resist the help of attendants who surrounded him. He suffers from sciatic pain. But he pressed on. It was the beginning of an arduous journey that took the 84-year-old pontiff to battle-scarred churches and desert pilgrimage sites. The backdrop to the pope's visit are the Plains of Ur—traditionally held to be the birthplace of Abraham and revered by Muslims, Jews and Christians—making his trip an all-the-more-powerful and astounding pilgrimage. The pontiff visited sites of deadly massacres— where thousands of Muslims died and also where in 2010, an attack tore at the heart of the Christian community. Francis carried with him a motto from the Gospel of Matthew:

“You are all brothers [and sisters.]”

It's astounding to grasp the magnitude of importance of his visit— both the context and the personal dangers of his journey to a war zone. Francis made it clear during months of preparation that nothing would make him cancel his visit. He was on a mission. He said to the disheartened people he met,

*We know how easy it is to be infected by the virus of discouragement  
that at times seems to spread all around us.*

*God has provided you with a faith that is an effective vaccine*

*against this proverbial virus [called war].*

This is the first trip Francis has taken since the pandemic began—choosing to step directly into the issues of war and peace, poverty and religious strife—all within the backdrop of an ancient biblical land. He is on a mission.

On the second day of his trip, Pope Francis met with the 90-year-old Shia Muslim cleric, the Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. The two met for forty minutes at the Ayatollah's home. The Ayatollah stood when the pontiff entered and they sat together. Francis put his hands on the cleric's folded hands and they shared a vision for peaceful co-existence. The event gives symbolic and practical meaning the central message of Francis' visit—he calls for Iraq to embrace its diversity. Francis evoked the common reverence for Abraham—

*From this place, where faith was born, from the land of our father Abraham, let us affirm that God is merciful and that the greatest blasphemy is to profane his name by hating our brothers and sisters. ...Hostility, extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart: they are betrayals of religion.*

Ayatollah Ali Sistani spoke of co-existence and of their shared human rights. And when the Ayatollah speaks, Shi'ites in Iraq and around the world listen.

When we read from the New Testament this morning, as we do every Sunday, especially from the Gospels—I wonder how many of us hear just how amazing and truly astounding The words of Jesus are. I wonder how many of us think about the social and political context of the world in which he lived and the mission he embraced. Without acknowledging the context in which he lived, we cannot begin to grasp the urgency and the message Jesus brought to an embattled and defeated people. And why he pressed on. The Gospels have been called “War Gospels.” The ravages of war and the destruction of his nation are critical to the story. The temple was destroyed in the year 70 AD and the nation was finally defeated and the people killed or dispersed. It was then that the Gospel writers, from locations outside Jerusalem were compelled to share the message Jesus, to shape the early Christian communities in order to preserve his mission. Within today's

Gospel lesson, usually referred to as “the Cleansing of the Temple,” Jesus shakes-up, intending to wake-up the people gathered in the Temple courtyard. Jesus travels from Gallilee, intent on going to Jerusalem and to the Temple perhaps to speak with the authorities. He is alarmed when he sees masses of people going about “business as usual” denying evidence all around them of a full-scale war that is brewing—a war intended to destroy them. The Abrahamic community was being harassed and killed indiscriminately at the whim or pleasure of the Roman army, the occupying force in Palestine. The Temple had been desecrated. The handwriting was on the wall. It was not that Jesus was concerned about their ritual practices but was stunned by the charade—going about “business as usual”—a deadly form of collusion, born of denial.

Alvin Toffler wrote a seminal book back in the 70s called, “Future Shock.” He and his wife, Adelaide Ferrell studied the impact of new technologies and communications on societies and the world. They defined *Future Shock* as “a personal perception of too much change in too short a period of time.” The book was a wake-up call—turning tables over in the commercial marketplace. It was a warning to those who go about “business as usual” without acknowledging the dangers of rapid change and bracing for its impact. The book predicts dire consequences of looking the other way. Toffler is a realist but also a conditional optimist. In the beginning of the book, this quote is highlighted:

*Our task is not to resist the future, but to help shape it.*

That’s good news, encouraging through challenging news for those who accept the changes along with the responsibilities.

Like the historic pandemic we have just experienced, the past year was not a time for “business as usual.” Business-as-usual lead to suffering and death. Some scientists declared the pandemic a war. It is. A war calls not for “business as usual.” To survive a war requires new assessments to determine “best practices” given the circumstances. A war calls not for individualism but for community-think and community-cooperation. The world has suffered over 2 1/2 Million deaths. Over 500,000 in the United States. Over 7,000 in Maryland. I wonder how many of us grasp the magnitude of this war we have all just experienced. I wonder where you are—I wonder where we are with this new reality. Next week we will return to the sanctuary for in-person worship but this is not a

return to business-as-usual. The tables have been turned over. The pigeons and goats released. I wonder what we have learned. I wonder how we will choose to shape our future.

Now more than ever we need to embrace the teachings and mission of Jesus. To understand on a new and deeper level what it means to be a faithful community of God. How to use our resources. How to think about who we are and what mission we have been given. Beyond the pandemic, what will we do? How will we shape our future? We may limp along but we are on a mission. What we have been through together is astounding. The new journey we are on now, is like our labyrinth—a journey inward so that we may be a more faithful community moving outward. We are not called to deny the present, not to resist the future, but to help shape it. Now more than ever we need to embrace the teachings and mission of Jesus as our own to discover anew, what it means to be a faithful community of God.

AMEN.

