

The Wandering Jew
(Or Is It the Wondering Jew)

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Lectionary: Exodus 10:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Cor. 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Scripture reading: John 2:13-22

During the Middle Ages, a legend arose that Joseph of Arimathea passed Jesus as Jesus was carrying his cross to Golgotha and said to him, “Go quicker,” to which Jesus replied, “I go; but you shall wait till I come,” that is, shall not die until Jesus returns in his glory. Thus arose the legend of the Wandering Jew. According to the Jewish Encyclopedia, “The figure of the doomed sinner, forced to wander without the hope of rest in death till the millennium, impressed itself upon the popular imagination, and passed thence into literary art, mainly with reference to the seeming immortality of the wandering Jewish race” (*Wandering Jew*).

But in truth, there *is* a Wandering Jew. His name is Jesus.

Our gospel lesson can be divided into two parts, although they are intimately connected, as we shall see: first, the cleansing of the Temple and, second, Jesus’ statement that he will raise up the destroyed Temple in three days.

The first part, the cleansing of the Temple, also appears in the synoptic gospels, Matthew (21:12-17), Mark (11:15-19), and Luke (19:45-48), but not at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, as in John, but at the end, indeed just days before Jesus is assassinated. The second part, the raising up of the Temple in three days, appears only in John. And Jesus’ words differ somewhat between John and the synoptic gospels. In Luke, he says, “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer’; but you have made it a den of robbers” (Luke 19:46). But while those differences reflect a difference in emphasis among the gospels, they in no wise change the meaning of this event.

First, the cleansing of the Temple. Make no mistake about it: this is a political act. In fact, for Jesus there can never be a separation between politics and religion. They are and shall always remain intimately interwoven. The fundamentalists get this, whether they be Christian, Muslim, or of any other faith. But unfortunately, too often fundamentalists mistake partisan politics and religious ideology for faithful action.

Yet that doesn't change the fact that Jesus made no distinction between politics and religion. As Prof. Hendricks points out, the Jerusalem Temple was not only a religious institution but was also, for the Jews, the center of Israel's economy and government; it was no less a secular institution than a religious institution. (Hendricks, *THE POLITICS OF JESUS*, p. 114) That's why as recorded in the first three gospels Jesus describes the Temple as a "den of robbers," directly quoting Jeremiah 7:11, where God asks: "Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?" And what made the Temple, in Jeremiah's time, a den of robbers? Because those within it oppressed the alien, the orphan, and the widow and went after other Gods (Jeremiah 7:5-10). Jeremiah records, "Therefore thus says the Lord God: My anger and my wrath shall be poured out on this place, on human beings and animals, on the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground; it will burn and not be quenched" (Jeremiah 7:20).

So, too, in Amos: "[Y]ou impose a tax on the poor and exact from him a levy of grain....You enemies of the righteous, you takers of bribes, you who subvert in the gate the cause of the needy!" (Amos 5:11-12) And again in Amos, "I loathe, I spurn your festivals, I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies. If you offer Me burnt offerings – or your meal offerings – I will not accept them; I will pay no heed to your gifts of fatlings. Spare Me the sound of your hymns, and let Me not hear the music of your lutes. But let justice well up like water, and righteousness like an unfailing stream." (Amos 5:21-14 (JPS))

And finally in Micah: "Hear this, you rulers of the House of Jacob, you chiefs of the House of Israel, who detest justice and make crooked all that is straight, who build Zion with crime, Jerusalem with iniquity! Her rulers judge for gifts, her priests give rulings for a fee, and her prophets divine for pay; yet they rely upon the Lord, saying, 'The Lord is in our midst; no calamity shall overtake us.' Assuredly, because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the Temple Mount a shrine in the woods." (Micah 3:9-12 (JPS))

So, that is the backdrop to our gospel lesson: that God demands righteousness, and justice for the poor. If we do not do that, then don't bother with worship or praise or thanksgiving or religious observance at all.

Yet in Jesus' time, exactly that was happening. As Borg & Crossan point out, money changing and selling of animals for sacrifice is necessary and perfectly ok, as long as the people are not cheated (Borg & Crossan, *THE LAST WEEK*, p. 48). In fact, these activities did not even occur in the inner Temple but in the outer Court of the Gentiles. So, Jesus' problem was not with the money changers and animal sellers. Jesus' problem was with the very establishment of the Temple: with the obscenely wealthy priests who not only collaborated with the Roman oppressors, accepting the protection of Rome, but who themselves cheated and oppressed the poor, who foreclosed on their farms and homes, who took a cut of the profits from the money changers and animal sellers, driving up prices, who even forced the poor widow to give what little she had (two copper coins) to avoid exclusion from God's blessing (Mark 12:41-44). (Hendricks, *THE POLITICS OF JESUS*, pp. 115-121) Elsewhere, Jesus says: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven....Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith....You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?" (Matthew 23:13, 23, 33) To quote Borg & Crossan, "God is a God of justice and righteousness and when worship substitutes for justice, God rejects God's temple – or, for us today, God's church" (Borg & Crossan, p. 49).

As the NIB states, "Jesus...issues a challenge to the authority of the Temple that quite literally shakes its foundations. Jesus throws the mechanics of temple worship into chaos, disrupting the temple system during one of the most significant feasts of the year so that neither sacrifices nor tithes could be offered that day" (NIB, vol. IX, p. 545). In so doing, Jesus is taking money from the pockets of the priests. So Jesus' cleansing of the Temple was a political act. But as the John passage makes absolutely clear, it was a profoundly religious act as well.

In the first three gospels, the cleansing occurs just days before Jesus is crucified and, indeed, provides further motive for his assassination. Luke records, in the verse immediately following the cleansing, "Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him..." (Luke 19:47). But in John the cleansing occurs at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, right after his miracle at the marriage in Cana - in effect setting the stage for his entire ministry. In John, unlike in the first three

gospels, right after the cleansing, the Jews question Jesus' authority to do such a thing. Jesus responds, rather cryptically, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." A rather preposterous statement since the Temple had been under construction for 46 years. The author of the gospel interprets Jesus' statement to mean a reference to his resurrection after three days in the tomb. The NIB points out that, "Since for Judaism the Temple is the locus of God's presence on earth, v.21 suggests that Jesus' body is now the locus of God....Jesus has authority to challenge the temple system because he is the locus of God's presence on earth" (NIB, vol. IX, p. 544).

However the author of the gospel of John interpreted Jesus' statement, I'm not so sure that's what Jesus himself meant at all. As the master political strategist, Jesus certainly knew that, if you shoot at the king, you must kill him; but ever since refusing to turn stones into bread to feed the world, Jesus knew he would not be killing the king. Certainly he understood already that the Roman and Jewish establishment would eventually kill him, but I don't think that's what he is talking about here. Remember Jesus at this point in John is about to embark on his itinerant ministry. He is about to become the Wandering Jew. He is saying, much clearer than in Matthew, Mark, or Luke, that the Temple is not the center of religious worship, that God cannot be confined to *any* place or space. Jesus, in short, is proclaiming the liberation of the impoverished Jew from the oppression of the Jewish establishment. No wonder they killed him; he was just as dangerous to those in power as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, and Amos had been. Ironically, of course, the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E.; and the Jews of the Diaspora could no longer worship in the Temple. It is said that the reason the First Temple, which was destroyed because of idolatry, was rebuilt within 70 years while the Second Temple, which was destroyed because of the oppression of the poor, has never been rebuilt lies in the fact that God forgives insults against God far more readily than cruelty against the vulnerable.

More importantly, though, Jesus is proclaiming the liberation not just of the Jewish poor but of all poor, everywhere, from their oppressors. To quote that great 19th Century Christian Karl Marx, "Workers of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains."

But, most important of all, through his death and resurrection, Christ liberates us all from the law of sin and death, enabling us in all times and in all places, even within the valley of the shadow of death, to live in intimate relationship with God – shalom. To experience, even in the midst of death and destruction and violence, the kingdom of God on earth, here and now. Again, as

the NIB puts it, “All religious institutional embeddedness – whether in the form of temple worship, unjust social systems, or repressive religious practices – is challenged by the revelation of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus” (NIB, vol. IX, 545).

Jesus frees us from all oppression and authority. Jesus the liberator comes to us. We need only open the door. But even Jesus, pre-Resurrection, didn’t quite get it. A Jewish apocalypticist, he believed it imminent that the Kingdom of God would break upon the earth with the end of the age. And he was right. With the Resurrection, God says to Jesus: “You ask me if the end of the age has come, if I have broken through into history, if my kingdom has come upon the earth. And my answer is: Yes, and you are it. Jesus is the experience of the Kingdom of God here and now, God in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, as Paul proclaims, “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38). For “remember,” said Jesus, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). With us *always*, to the end of the age.

But for that promise that Jesus makes there is a price for Jesus to pay, even now, even today. Even now, even today, “the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20) because he *is* the Wandering Jew, wandering forever with us and for us, no matter what, no matter where, even to the end of the age.

Amen.

Benediction: Go in peace. Do what is right. Serve God. Amen.