

## “A Different Kind of Church Cleaning”

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(Exodus 20:1-17, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22)  
Third Sunday in Lent  
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Children absorb more in worship than parents imagine. “It had been a while since our daughter, Jennifer, 5, had included the Lord’s Prayer in her bedtime prayers, leaving her only to pray it during Sunday worship. When I suggested we pray it together one night, she confidently recited it without missing a word, and ended it, “For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen. Please be seated.”<sup>[1]</sup> And here in church we teach our children the story of our journey with God.

What a story! **Life is a journey with God** – from Egypt to Jerusalem to Dayton. Using Scripture, with a bag of texts<sup>[2]</sup> as our MapQuest, I want to offer three directions for the Church as we journey with God.

**People on a journey need rules for the road.** So we have the Ten Commandments. No civilization can long survive without faith and rules. No other safe way through the wilderness. The Hebrew people had been slaves for 400 years and had no idea how to be free people. So God gave the Ten Commandments as rules for the road. Live like this and stay free. These are not old-fashioned prohibitions dreamed up by austere nuns in Catholic school or mean-spirited Puritans in colonial America. These are freedom rules.

No wonder churches with a catechism for their children, insists that they know the Ten Commandments. And don’t forget that a Georgia Congressman, Lynn Westmoreland, promoting a bill to post the Ten Commandments in public buildings, appeared on the Colbert Report: Colbert: “What are the Ten Commandments?” Westmoreland: “You mean all of them?--Um... Don’t murder. Don’t lie. Don’t steal. Um... I can’t name them all.” Colbert: “The guy co-sponsors a bill about the Ten Commandments and doesn’t even know them.”

People on a journey need rules for the road to keep them free and not enslaved to the ways of the world.

**People on a journey can get hopelessly lost.** Fast forward our journey to the Temple. Perhaps a little Kenneth Burke will help us. Let’s overlay some elements of Burke’s “pentad” over John’s story: ACT – What is happening? SCENE – Where is the act happening? AGENT – Who is involved and what roles?

THE SCENE: Jerusalem is crawling with pilgrims in the city for the festival. 400,000 by most estimates. The temple area where Jesus turned over the tables was the size of 12 soccer fields. Not many people saw it. So label this as a symbolic scene underscoring the announcement that God’s kingdom has arrived. In John’s Gospel it acts as a sign.

THE AGENTS: Jesus in an act of authentic street theatre symbolically cleanses the temple and its den of thieves with their gouging of the poor.<sup>[3]</sup> Make no mistake. This is not a publicity stunt or Jesus “venting.” This is holy anger bordering on despair. God has been waiting and waiting for centuries for a faithful people. God’s steadfast love has held through thick and thin: through the demise of the shrine at Shiloh, the first temple in ruins, the flags of Israel and Judah choked in the dust of exile, a long line of awful kings whose obituaries

sound like a broken record: “And \_\_\_\_\_ did what was evil in the sight of God.” You could name the good kings on one hand and have fingers left over; the bad ones make Presidents Pierce, Buchanan, Grant, and Andrew Johnson look good.<sup>[4]</sup>

Now a second temple, 46 years in the making and not yet finished. A hall of fame of prophets have trudged through Jerusalem cajoling and calling for repentance and communicating hope. Ezekiel envisions God’s presence leaving the temple. “Hosea, Micah, Amos, and Isaiah rail against the superficiality of worship, the meaningless of liturgy, and the false piety of those in charge. But Israel has not listened or heard or obeyed.

So “The day Jesus entered the Temple, Israel was not free. The Torah was not being observed. The wrong people were running the Temple.”<sup>[5]</sup> A broken-hearted Jesus surveys the waste. Jesus is consumed with zeal for a faithful house of God. But it is a wasteland of people fussing about money.

THE ACT: Jesus provides us with a powerful speech act. Prophets speak up but also act out. Ezekiel climbed a watchtower to act out his role as watchman over Israel. Isaiah walked naked through the streets of Jerusalem to demonstrate the coming exile. Hosea married the prostitute Gomer and then paid hard-earned cash to buy her back from her lovers. And Jesus takes a whip and chases out the moneychangers and turns over the tables and pours out the coins. Preachers are living speech acts. Preachers not only speak up, but we act out.

Jesus’ strategy was rooted in the OT prophetic message, especially that of Jeremiah 7. Remember Jeremiah’s own preemptive attack on the Temple: “Do not trust these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’” This temple will not save you. Your faith, says Jeremiah, is made of sticks and stones and superstition. So Jeremiah insists, “Stop oppressing the alien, the orphan, and the widow and the poor. Stop breaking the Ten Commandments and then standing before me in this house which is called by my name and saying, ‘We are safe.’ Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?” Jeremiah and Jesus go together.

Now, we have one bit of Gospel housecleaning to do because John and Mark have a different take on the Temple SCENE. John has Jesus start his mission in the temple; Mark has him end in the temple. Perhaps John is saying God had waited long enough for a faithful people. John has Jesus make several trips to Jerusalem; Mark only one climactic one. John sees the temple act as announcing the arrival of God’s kingdom; Mark as the reason they killed Jesus. But that is for another sermon. What is clear is that everyone in the scene, except Jesus, takes the wrong road.

And the final direction: **People on a journey have to lighten the load.** When Jesus cleans out the temple, we should ask, if Jesus came to First Baptist Church, what would he throw out? A church can accumulate too much junk. There are times when a people on the move must throw away anything that hinders them. Remember the scene in *Exit the King* by Ionesco: Old king getting ready to die. Marguerite says, “He’s got to travel light. (To the king:) Throw everything away, lighten the load.” Doctor: “It’s time he began to get rid of the ballast. Lighten the load, your Majesty.” Rusty sword of self-defense. Crown of pride. “Lighten the load.”

Is there any idolatry like religious idolatry? How many churches have bet their future on the teachings of the prosperity gospel or positive thinking or possibility thinking or psychological

therapeutic preaching? These false gospels crumble into dust during hard times. TIME.com had a story about the prosperity gospel playing a role in the foreclosure crisis because pastors were teaching their members that God caused bankers to overlook bad credit reports.

After all, there are OT texts that seem to advocate the prosperity gospel. But then there's the witness of Scripture against the prosperity gospel. In Job, for example, a righteous man loses everything. What a powerful rebuttal of the prosperity gospel. But decades later, the book of Job, in the hands of a redactor, gets a new conclusion and this scribe, caught up in the idolatry that God makes all good people wealthy, gives Job all his children back alive. One scholar says that her mother, a thorough and total literalist refused to believe this story at the end of Job because having lost a child, she simply knew better.

At some point, we have to lighten our load so we are free to love God and all our neighbors – the least of these – as ourselves. We really are all in this together. We, the people of God, journey toward the New Jerusalem. We have a map with directions, a historical knowledge of how easy it is to get lost, and as a people on the move we will travel light. We journey with Jesus and laying aside every weight and burden, we lighten the load, and we journey with Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Do not grow weary or lose heart. Make straight paths for your feet and walk in the way that leads to life. Journey on!

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[1] Peter Marty, Lutheran pastor, Davenport, Iowa. Context, April, 2009.

[2] Exodus 20, Jeremiah 7, John 2, and I Corinthians 1. First, a necessary word about texts. Some of you are perhaps tempted to read Scripture as if the Bible were given, in its entirety from Genesis to Revelation, by God to Moses on the mountain. The Bible never existed as a whole book until the church put it together and named it our holy book. When I preach on Sunday I do so from a text, always from one or more texts. And a text stands some distance from whatever historical encounter might have happened. To say the Bible is a text means:

- That it stands some distance from the reality of raw facts,
- That it is a stylized, artistic act of imagination,
- That the act of imagination has transposed history into artistry,
- That this artistic transposition from factual happening (to which we have no access no matter how much we desire it or pretend it) to text (which we have in our hands) is accomplished by the imaginative work of real agents who intentionally make text.
- As we sit before these texts, we have work to do. First the texts ask us to study them, trust them, engage them, be led by them, to submit our modernist assumptions to them, and to have confidence that these texts are the ones that merit our primal attention as a word of life. These texts must be allowed to confront the weak thin texts that some of you drag in here on Sunday morning: a text of technological, therapeutic military consumerism that is an odd mix of moralism, market ideology, individualist boasting, self-congratulations, and anxiety. A biblical preaching that will not name God out of narrative and into the world is simply unbiblical. One of the unfortunate interpretations of this text among Baptist preachers has been teaching congregations not to sell things in church. So Baptists in many regions never have festivals or bazaars or other kinds of fund raising and of course, never never never BINGO! Do you see how safe and nonthreatening it is to treat the text in such a dull way? The preacher may look naïve or out-of-touch, but he certainly will not ignite fires of controversy with this lame interpretation of the text (David Buttrick, *Homiletic*). A New Yorker cartoon shows a man asking at the information counter of a bookstore. The clerk types on his keyboard and peers intently into a computer screen and replies, "The Bible, that would be

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under self-help.” Richard B. Hays says the Bible has lost its place and people have trouble knowing what to make of it. Many preachers treat it as a consumer product, a launching pad for cute sermon ideas that are totally unrelated to the master narrative of Scripture, or as a therapeutic option for helping folks reinvent and improve themselves. But hear me please: The Bible is not a self-help book. There’s nothing in these pages written by Dr. Phil or Oprah or Stephen Covey or any of a plethora of self-help, positive-thinking, get rich now consultants. The Bible is about God and about God’s action in creating a good world, and then rescuing a lost and broken world from its own foibles (Richard B. Hays, “Can the Gospels Teach Us How to Read the Old Testament?”).

[3] Scholarly consensus holds that a) Jesus predicted the Temple’s coming destruction; b) that he symbolically enacted this prediction by overturning the tables in the Temple court; c) that the priests, construing this prediction as a threat against the temple, moved to arrest and execute Jesus and d) that they necessarily involve Pilate, who ordered Jesus crucified.

[4] Worst Presidents in American History. I checked polls from 1948 to 2009. Polls included Schlesinger (1948, 1962), Murray-Blessing Survey of 846 historians (1982), Chicago Tribune (1982), Siena (1982, 1990, 1994, 2002), CSPAN (2005), and Wall Street Journal (2009). It is interesting that three of the worst presidents served on either side of the greatest president, Abraham Lincoln.

[5] N. T. Wright, “Redemption from the New Perspective? Towards a Multi-Layered Pauline Theology of the Cross.” Published in *Redemption*, ed. S. T. Davis, D. Kendall, G. O’Collins (Oxford: OUP) 2006, 69-100.