

A poem by [Nils Bolander](#) frames my sermon this morning. It's entitled:

## **Christianity Was Once An Eagle Message**<sup>1</sup>

Christianity was once an eagle message

Sprung from the nest on the highest  
mountain peak on diving wings that  
glittered.

But we chastened its bold feathers,  
competently straightened its cutting beak  
and lo!—it was a black bird,  
a tame loquacious raven.

Christianity was once a lion gospel

Always seeking a warm and living prey,  
a young lion of Judah.

But we clipped its sharp, crooked claws,  
stilled its thirst for the blood of the heart  
and turned it into a purring cottage cat.

Christianity was once a desert sermon,

Mean and sharp as the terrible *africus*,<sup>2</sup>  
burning as the desert sand.

But we turned it into a garden idyll,  
mignonettes, asters and pious roses,  
a romantic mood in Gethsemane.

Lord, take care of our pious cowardice!

Give it swift eagle wings and sharp lion's  
claws!

Give it scent of wild honey and simoom,<sup>3</sup>  
and then say with the Baptist's voice:

This is the victory that conquers the  
world. This is Christianity.

**Misplaced religious zeal has done much, through the ages, to dishonor the name Christian.**

- The Crusades, the Inquisition, the Witch trials...
- century after century of wars in which confessors of Christ drew swords at one another across battle lines...
- or with weapons as instruments of "Manifest Destiny," seized as gifts from God's hands the lands and resources that had sustained New World communities for thousands of years.

**Such zeal continues, newly resurgent in our own time. And haven't we seen too much of it lately—especially the fundamentalist variety?**

- Zeal that leads to the violent claiming of lives without restriction, distinction, or remorse.
- Zeal that prompts young people to strap on suicide vests and wade into crowded marketplaces; or obliterate themselves with fentanyl.
- Zeal that has pits race against race, tribe against tribe, sect against sect, political party against political party.

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<sup>1</sup> Poem by Nils Bolander from *Divine Inspiration: The Life of Jesus in World Poetry*. Robert Atwan, et al., editors. (New York: Oxford, 1998) page 71.

<sup>2</sup> *africus* = a Roman god of the south west wind. Encarta® World English Dictionary © 1999

<sup>3</sup> *simoom* = a hot dry wind that blows across North Africa and the Arabian peninsula, carrying dust and sand particles. Encarta® World English Dictionary © 1999

All too often in the long history of humanity, **BEING ZEALOUS** has translated into being **dangerous** and **destructive**.

So, we have **good reason to be cautious** when—midway through this Lenten journey—we come face to face with **acts of zeal** on the part of none other than Jesus himself.

Jesus goes to the Temple to visit a **Sacred Place**, but what he finds instead is a **marketplace**, and he sees **firsthand** how the **spiritual core** of Israel's relationship with God has been **replaced** with a **system of commerce** that takes advantage of people and makes **relationship** with God a mere **transactional affair**.

His reaction is **immediate** and **visceral**... Jesus is **outraged**, and filled with a passionate **zeal** to **do** something.

TABLES fly, MONEY scatters, and **out comes a WHIP** to drive the whole operation—man and beast—out of God's House.

STOP MAKING MY FATHER'S HOUSE A MARKETPLACE! he shouts.

JESUS IS ANGRY! And aren't you a little uncomfortable with that?!

**ZEAL** is not a word we tend to associate with the Jesus of our Creeds and Lutheran Confessions.

**ZEAL** may be OK for Pentecostals, or Southern Baptists.  
But Lutherans?

**DOGGED**—that's a good word; or **STAUNCH**. Staunch Lutherans.  
And maybe, on occasion, like our namesake, Brother Martin, **BOLD**.

But **we steer clear** of **ZEAL**.

And after the long history of **zealous religion gone bad**, we have a **right**—an **obligation**—to be more than a little cautious, don't we?  
...even if that means **chastening** faith's **bold feathers** and **clipping** its **sharp, crooked claws**?

**HERE'S THE QUESTION THEN: Is there any room for the kind of ZEAL we see in Jesus this morning, the kind of HOLY HAVOC that calls systems of injustice what they are and seeks to overturn them?**

**Is there any room for ZEAL of this sort in today's church—a way to be zealous that doesn't involve dehumanizing the other?**

**That doesn't involve attacking or denigrating?  
A way that doesn't depend on violence to achieve its ends?**

These days, white supremacists, along with the so-called evangelical Christian right (Oh how I hate that the word “evangelical” has been hijacked!) — emboldened by support from their preferred candidate— are devising strategies to TAKE BACK the power they feel slipping away by virtue of demographics, the power they consider their birthright.

**Their brand of zeal may give lip service to God and use Jesus' name, but their final goal is the dismantling of the Bill of Rights.**

On February 22nd, right-wing activist Jack Posobiec opened the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington DC with these words:

“Welcome to the end of democracy. We are here to overthrow it completely. We didn't get all the way there on January 6, but we will endeavor to get rid of it and replace it with this right here,” he said, holding up a cross necklace.

“After we burn that swamp to the ground, we will establish the new American republic on its ashes, and our first order of business will be righteous retribution for those who betrayed America.”<sup>4</sup>

**The ZEAL gaining steam on the radical right has nothing to do with the Christ of the gospels who, in the Garden of Gethsemane, refused to endorse violence as a means of his own protection.<sup>5</sup>**

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Heather Cox Richardson in [February 25, 2024 - by Heather Cox Richardson \(substack.com\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> See Matthew 26:51-56 do you think that i cannot appeal to my father and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?!”

**The Right's hateful rhetoric—such as the repeated claim that immigrants are “poisoning the blood” of our nation—echo the anti-Jewish rhetoric used by the National Socialist Party (AKA the Nazis) 100 years ago during its rise to power.**

**Nearly half of Americans now agree with the claim.<sup>6</sup>**

**BLOOD AND SOIL, shouted Hitler, is it not our duty to protect them?**

**The antisemitic nationalism that achieved new heights under Naziism infected the churches and every other German institution.**

**The Confessing Church, a movement initiated by Martin Niemöller, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and others in opposition to Nazification of the church, represented a tiny minority of congregations.**

**Is the Nazi brand of ZEAL what Jesus employed in the Temple that day?**

**When Alexei Navalny's mother, Lyudmila, stood up publicly, day after day, to ask for the release of her son's body so she could bury him, that was a kind of ZEAL.**

**She reminds me of other mothers—**

**Like the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who marched in protest week after week, year after year, demanding to know the fate of their husbands, partners, children who had been “disappeared” under Argentina's military junta.<sup>7</sup>**

**Like the Women in White—Muslim and Christian—during Liberia's civil war, who refused to accept their country's slow march to oblivion and instead PRAYED THE DEVIL BACK TO HELL.<sup>8</sup>**

**Like Harriet Tubman, who risked life and limb to bring enslaved Blacks to freedom...**

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<sup>6</sup> *The Christian Century*, March 2024, p. 11

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.learningforjustice.org/classroom-resources/texts/madres-de-plaza-de-mayo>

<sup>8</sup> A film by this title tells the story of the Liberian women for peace who successfully pressured their leaders to engage in peace talks. Bill Moyers Journal featured Leymah Bgwee and the film's producer Abigail Disney in an interview on June 19, 2009. Find it @ <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/06192009/watch.html> The film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* can be purchased through this website: <http://www.forkfilmsdvdsales.com/>

**Like the mothers, sisters and partners of our time who will not allow the deaths of their sons and brothers at the hands of police to be swept under the rug, or fly below the radar, or to become anonymous.**

**Read these stories and then ask yourself: is not the zeal of these women who stared down unjust, self-serving, self-protecting leaders and systems... is not their zeal the very kind of zeal we find mirrored in Christ's act of civil and religious disobedience in our gospel?**

**The kind our world needs in order to get to a place it's seldom been?**

**Dear people, we could use more of THAT kind of ZEAL.**

**For in the absence of such zeal our faith loses its ability to call people to account, and before long it becomes domesticated.**

**When a faith tradition identifies too readily with the powers-that-be it makes bargains with those powers and accepts the boundaries imposed upon it.**

"The Prince of Darkness," says Brueggemann, "tries frantically to keep the world closed so that we can be administered. The Prince has such powerful allies in this age."<sup>9</sup>

**Today, Jesus shows up and says, "I WILL NOT BE ADMINISTERED!"**

**In his voice reverberates the voice of the prophet, his arms flip tables, his wrist cracks the whip. His indictment upsets the status quo.**

**This scene of Jesus in the Temple appears in all four gospels but only in John's gospel does it come at the beginning.**

**Perhaps it's John's way of telling us that the Way of Jesus was and always will be a threat to the status quo, to every domination system.**

**As a public act it sets the stage for the hardened opposition Jesus will experience from those who represent the institution, the powers that be, for Jesus makes WILD again what had become domesticated.**

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<sup>9</sup> Walter Brueggemann *Finally Comes the Poet*.

In the poem that began this sermon, Nils Bolander laments that the gospel's eagle message has been tamed, turning a lion into a purring cottage cat.

But the answer to this predicament will not be found in a return to religious zealotry or through the ushering in of another era of triumphal nationalism in the name of Christ.

**The poem's solution, and ours, is a direct appeal to Christ himself to reinvigorate the church—so that the dynamic power at the core of the gospel might **SING** again—or better—ROAR!**

**Not** for the purpose of devouring all rivals, but rather...

- to unsettle what has become settled;
- to animate what has become domesticated;
- to restore the curved beak and clipped wings so the gospel can soar with an authority that calls forth all our heart and soul and mind and strength the Spirit can muster.

**After Jesus cleansed the Temple, his challengers sought to destroy him. When he was nailed to the cross, they thought the deed was done.**

**But the cross, far from being the end, was the very means by which Christ drew the whole world to himself.**

**It was not the end for him, neither will it be for us.  
It is only the bare beginning.**

**The seed is planted. The fruiting awaits.**

**Amen.**