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Lent 3B
Peace, Seattle
March 11, 2012
John 2:13-22

HOLY HAVOC

A poem by Nils Bolander frames my sermon. It's entitled: **Christianity Was Once An Eagle Message**[1]

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,[2]
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,[3]
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 or fired weapons 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, among other communities of faith in addition to our own. And haven't we seen too much of it lately—especially the fundamentalist variety?

[1] 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.
[2] *africus* = a Roman god of the south west wind. Encarta® World English Dictionary © 1999
[3] *simoom* = a hot dry wind that blows across North Africa and the Arabian peninsula, carrying dust and sand particles. Encarta® World English Dictionary © 1999

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- 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.
- Zeal that has pitted tribe against tribe and sect against sect in Liberia, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Iraq, Nepal, The Baltics…and on and on.

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 market place, and he sees first hand 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 tangential 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 MARKET-PLACE! he shouts.

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

Zeal is not a word we tend to want to associate with Jesus, much less our Lutheran selves.

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," don't we?

And after the long history of zealous religion gone bad, we have a right—an obligation even—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, 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? In today's world?

Is there a way of being 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?

Nobel laureate Leymah Bgowee, who, with other Liberian women—both Christian and Muslim—started a movement that ultimately brought peace to their country after fifteen years of brutal civil war and the deaths of 200,000 people, tells her story in her memoir, **Mighty Be our Powers**.[4]

[4] Mighty Be our Powers (New York: Beast Books, 2011)

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Listen to what she says:

"During the years that civil war tore us apart, foreign reporters often came to document the nightmare. [Their accounts] are all about the power of destruction [and inevitably focus on men.]

"In the traditional telling of war stories, women are always in the background.
Our suffering is just a sidebar to the main tale."

"During the war in Liberia, almost no one reported the other reality—[the reality] of women's lives.

- How we hid our husbands and sons from soldiers looking to recruit or kill them.
- How, in the midst of chaos, we walked miles to find food and water for our families—
- How we kept life going so that there would be something left to build on when peace returned.
- And how we created strength in sisterhood, and spoke out for peace on behalf of all Liberians.

"This [story I tell] is not a traditional war story. It is about an army of women in white standing up when no one else would—unafraid, because the worst things imaginable had already happened to us. It is about how we found the moral clarity, persistence and bravery to raise our voices against war and restore sanity to our land."[5]

Read her story, and then ask yourself, is not the zeal of Leymah Bgowee and the women in white who stared down unjust, self-serving leaders, and PRAYED THE DEVIL BACK TO HELL,[6] is not their zeal the very kind of zeal we find in our gospel? And the kind our world needs in order to get to a place it's seldom been?

How many of us have heard of KONY 2012?
It's been all over the media and it's gone viral on the world wide web.

Jason Russell, who founded the Invisible Children organization after face-to-face encounters with Uganda's lost children, posted a 30-minute film about Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) leader Joseph Kony online on Wednesday. By Thursday morning it had already been viewed by 32 million people around the globe.

Joseph Kony's zeal in destroying the lives of tens of thousands of Ugandan children and families over a period of over two decades is well documented.[7] His atrocities have earned him the top spot as the world's #1 most wanted international war criminal. But in spite of that infamous distinction, he's managed to avoid capture.

Russell and his organization want to change that. Through a zealous strategy of their own, they want to make the rebel leader so widely known that he can no longer stay hidden; they want to make him so famous around the world that people of conscience, awakened by this story, will pressure their governments into action and bring about Kony's arrest and trial at the international criminal court.

Kony 2012 is an experiment on a grand scale that combines the same social networking tools that aided last year's Arab Spring with a call to action that is gaining more momentum every single day.

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[5] Ibid. Prologue, p. ix, x.
[6] 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 Bgowee 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/
[7] To follow the story of LRA leader Joseph Kony and the Invisible Children organization's campaign, Kony 2012, to have him arrested and tried by the International Court, follow these links: http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/Africa-Monitor/2012/0309/How-Kony-2012-campaign-went-viral-and-focused-rare-attention-on-Africa and http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/nationworld/2017703831_konyvideo09.html and Invisible Children.

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I encourage you to see the film and to read also the critiques that have been raised about the motivation, the tactics and the finances behind this effort.[8] You can find a link to the film on our Peace homepage. And if there's enough interest, we'll host a screening of it right here at Peace.

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 is not to be found in a return to religious zealotry or to another era of triumphalism in the name of Christ.

The poem's solution, and ours, is a direct appeal to Christ himself and to all who bear his name to reinvigorate the church through the Spirit's power—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 the heart and soul and mind and strength the Spirit can muster.

When Jesus cleansed the temple, his challengers sought to destroy him. And 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 for us. It is only the bare beginning. And the world is about to turn.

Hymn of the Day: *Canticle of the Turning.* #723 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. © Augsburg Fortress
Text: Rory Cooney, b. 1952, based on the Magnificat
Music: Irish traditional: STAR OF COUNTY DOWN.
Text © GIA Publications, Inc.

[8] A number of critiques are documented at the Huffington Post site: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/08/joseph-kony-video-stop-kony_n_1332427.html