

## “Jesus at High Noon”

A Meditation based on Psalm 19, John 2:13-22,  
and the U.S.-led attack on the people of Iraq

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A nation, once attacked, now the attacker. A frightening vision of global supremacy and a new definition of war. A smirk on the face of a belligerent and tyrannical leader. A tear on the cheek of a military spouse. A load of personal belongings on the tired back of an aged man, fleeing for his life. A stand-off at high noon on the dusty main street of 21st-century Dodge. Throughout this past week, a collective churning in our stomachs, a fear that has no name, a nagging concern that something just doesn't make sense here.

I really wanted to preach about something light, to share a laugh or two in today's meditation—God knows we need it this week—perhaps focus the entire meditation around the complex social system in which meerkats care for each other and protect the group from enemy attack—but I simply cannot. The stakes are too high, I love my country too much, and I have too much respect for what countless veterans in the past have done to ensure our freedoms as citizens of the United States...my friends, I cannot be silent in the face of their historic courage.

Neither can I remain silent when confronted with the biblical texts we read today. Today, as on every other Sunday, we look at the situation of our world and our lives through the lens of scripture. Today, unlike any other Sunday in the past year together, we look squarely in the face of Jesus when he was whopping mad. Today we see Jesus taking the law into his own hands. Today we see Jesus turning tables and shooing out the vendors. Today, we see Jesus at high noon on Main Street.

The Psalm reading sets a stage for understanding Jesus' outburst in the temple complex. Unlike the binding laws and regulations in our society, Hebraic law is not understood in legalistic terms, but is understood to be revelation—insights and advice from God—that can actually transform a person. The Hebrew word for law is really better translated as “instruction” or “teaching”. The law consisted of directives intended to help people live a full life. The effects of the law are all relational, they enhance human life itself.

The perfect law, according to the psalmist, is sure, right, and pure; it transforms you by giving you your life back, by bestowing wisdom on you and rejuvenating your heart; the law opens our eyes.

Thus the psalmist describes the law as more valuable than gold and sweeter than honey; it does good for others (like gold can do), and it delights the palate as does honey. As a sweetening agent, honey can change the taste of food; in like manner, the law provides a particular flavor, a pleasing flavor to everything within its influence.

In this sense of law, Jesus was a law-abiding citizen. His teachings strongly indicate that Jesus believed in the transformation of human relationships through following the instructions of God. Love God. Love your neighbor. The hundreds of laws in the Hebrew tradition all boil down to this, and the psalmist lays the groundwork for understanding the significance of the law in transforming human relationships.

Now fast forward several hundred years from the psalmist's description of the law to the temple complex in mid-first-century Jerusalem. Jesus enters and discovers the vendors appropriately plying their trade. By the time of Jesus' life, the sacrificial system had expanded into a lucrative enterprise, for the law had become legalistic and binding. In order to make appropriate sacrifices, for example, people were obligated to come to the temple. Since their

journeys were often long and tiring, a culture of convenience had sprung up in temple square. To accommodate travelers, vendors set up shop inside the temple gates to provide the proper animals and elements for the various sacrifices and rituals. By the first century of the common era, the dominant culture had convincingly argued that such commerce was a legitimate transformation of the holy place into a marketplace.

Enter Jesus of Nazareth. Correction, enter a very angry Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps you've heard various interpretations of the anger Jesus expressed in the temple. One: his anger shows us that it is ok to express our strident feelings. Jesus painted as a kind of poster child for the "share your feelings" group. Perhaps, suggests another interpretation, Jesus' anger teaches us that righteous indignation is an acceptable form of anger. Just focus that anger at some institution or systemic evil, and God will applaud from the heavens. Perhaps Jesus' anger is the great human equalizer—so when I act on my anger I am in good company. So goes that interpretation.

I suggest another way of understanding the anger of Jesus today...an understanding based on the law as teaching, as instruction, as agent of human transformation. From this perspective, the anger of Jesus is anger at a system that has corrupted what was created by God precisely to save humans. What was good has been obliterated by the greed of commerce run amuck. Notice that in John's account we are told that Jesus uses a "whip of cords", not on the people, but to drive out the sheep and the cattle. Notice also that Jesus does not physically attack the moneychangers but attacks the system by overturning their tables and scattering their coins. By entering the temple mall, with all of the other shoppers, Jesus enters the clash of two paradigms—one that brings life and the other that sucks it out of people for the benefit of a few. The story leaves no doubt about where Jesus stands in such a clash. His actions are a radical criticism of what has become the Temple cult and its market-driven economy. Jesus dramatically objects to the grandiose charade of piety that ignored the purpose and heart of the law which was to bring full and enriching relationships to all humans.

By placing this scene near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, rather than at the end of his life as do the other three gospels, the author of John is making clear that Jesus will bring a sword, as he fights his way through the layers and layers of exploitation that have choked the life out of the law.

This is the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth: love God, love your neighbor. Do not exploit another person in the name of religion, in the name of God. This is the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth.

But, my friends, in our country this day, there is another gospel being written. It is the gospel of The Project for the New American Century. When I first heard about it several months ago, I thought it was fantasy, too un-American to actually be true. I dismissed it as yet another conspiracy theory explaining the actions of the current administration. I no longer believe that. I now believe that this new gospel is slowly making its way into the foreign policy of our country, and it is being woven even into the fabric of the flag itself. We ask, "Why are we in Iraq?" I believe that the proponents of this new gospel provide us an answer.

With fear, I read to you from the Statement of Principles of The Project for the New American Century.

"As the 20th century draws to a close, the United States stands as the world's most preeminent power...what we require is a military that is strong and ready to meet both present and future challenges; a foreign policy that boldly and purposefully promotes American principles abroad; and national leadership that accepts the United States' global responsibilities... The history of the 20th century should have taught us that it is important to shape circumstances before crises emerge, and to meet threats before they

become dire. This history of the past century should have taught us to embrace the cause of American leadership.”

The group’s website benignly announces that,

“The Project for the New American Century intends, through issue briefs, research papers, advocacy journalism, conferences, and seminars, to explain what American world leadership entails. It will also strive to rally support for a vigorous and principled policy of American international involvement and to stimulate useful public debate on foreign and defense policy and America’s role in the world.”

These documents were dated September 2000 and June 1997 respectively, and were signed by a group of 47 people, including Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and Jeb Bush.

At first glance, the proposals of this group sound pretty good—the idea of sharing our democratic vision and benefits with the world. However, since September 11th, 2001, the Project for the New American Century has used words and phrases like “unipolar,” “Pax Americana,” and “regime change” to describe the singular and unquestioned power over other nations that they envision for the United States of America. Contrary to the democratic vision upon which this country was founded, the PNAC folks are crafting a gospel of an American global empire. Intertwined in this gospel, are the hoped-for realities of worldwide political reform, U.S. economic superiority and military might, and the advancement of our interests into the lives of our global neighbors. In other words, it is an American dream based on U.S. supremacy and domination.

This is NOT what my father fought in the Battle of the Bulge to ensure. This is not the free and democratic ideal for which you honored veterans spilled blood. This is a new American dream, only a few years old, and it is based not on democracy, but on empire. And we know all too well from history the effects of empires on both citizens and subjugated alike.

Return with me to Jesus of Nazareth—proclaimer of a different gospel. Jesus was an outcast from the empire of his day, and was eventually crucified by its mighty and unquestioned power. He railed against its paradigm that day on Main Street in the temple complex, not because he didn’t have better things to do, but because it was a paradigm that oppressed, that obliterated the law and its purpose, that exploited the many for the benefit of the few. By contrast to the gospel co-opted by the temple vendors, the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth is encapsulated in just two commandments—Love God, Love your Neighbor. This is the gospel upon which our faith is based.

The new gospel being promulgated by a few in this nation is the gospel of exploitation and domination.

Which gospel will we embody?

Amen and Blessed Be.