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# **The Journey IV: Being the Temple**

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## The Journey IV: Being the Temple

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Each gospel displays its unique witness to the good news of Jesus Christ from the first story it presents of his public ministry.

The first story differs among the gospels and serves as a key to interpret that particular gospel.

Matthew's gospel places Jesus high on a hill to bless the poor in spirit and those on the margins and correct the distorted laws.

In Mark's hurry, Jesus teaches with authority while casting out demons.

The Gospel of Luke spotlights Jesus' sermon in the synagogue when he proclaims the spirit of the Lord was upon him.

John's gospel, so different from the others, opens with "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God," introducing Jesus' eternal and divine nature. His public ministry begins in the Jerusalem temple, God's house.

Before I read, please pray with me,

*Holy God, you remain beyond our comprehension and yet you infuse all of nature with your radiant presence. Silence any voice but your voice. Let your spirit seep through these words and startle us so we hear your son's promise and draw closer you. Amen.*

**John 2:13-22**

<sup>13</sup> The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

<sup>14</sup> In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

<sup>15</sup> Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.

<sup>16</sup> He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

<sup>17</sup> His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

<sup>18</sup> The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?”

<sup>19</sup> Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

<sup>20</sup> The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?”

<sup>21</sup> But Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body.

<sup>22</sup> After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and

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they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

*This is the word of the Lord, Thanks be to God.*

Of all the anniversaries marked in the past week, this is so trivial yet pertinent as spring training games begins. In 1857 the Knickerbocker Rules were amended for the “manly and healthful” game of baseball to declare a winner from the total aces scored over nine innings. Previously it was game-over once a team scored twenty-one aces.

Those engaged in the game believed that baseball offered an alternative to billiards and other “unmentionable nightly amusements” and to that end they also dismissed the practice of hitting a runner with a thrown ball. Too often this caused fistfights.

Let’s not be too magnanimous of their motive. The old rule of just scoring twenty-one aces usually resulted in a brief game. The fledgling National Association of Baseball Players wanted to attract spectators, who would be interested in watching longer games, and more likely to buy a ticket.<sup>1</sup>

Some enterprising folks saw potential riches and turned a pastime meant for pleasure into multi-billion dollar industry, cultivating a devotion that rivals religion among some people.

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<sup>1</sup> Garrison Keillor, “On This Date,” *The Writers’ Almanac*, March 7, 20, <https://www.garrisonkeillor.com/radio/twa-the-writers-almanac-for-march-7-2019/>

When I first read that story, I smiled, and remembered what I learned as a consultant; always follow the money to uncover the truth.

If people value something, others will try to package it for commerce, put it just outside of reach as to increase its desirability, and stimulate competition for it. Market economies create winners and losers, haves and have-nots, and structures to feed the economy.

Always follow the money. Look how it flows. Ask why.

From the very first covenant God made with Abraham, and repeated time and again, God desires intimacy and our obedience to love God and others.

After the exodus God gave people laws, a code to saturate their lives as they wandered in the wilderness, investing the fabric of their relationships with holiness, restoring dignity and devotion for all of God's creation.

To commemorate that exodus, the Passover celebration asks the faithful to open their lives to God and seek forgiveness. They remember God's saving acts to restore an intimate relationship not encumbered by bondage to any ruler.

Overtime, rituals codified going to the Temple to give a gift, which later became a sacrifice, which then became a relative ranking of animal sacrifices as an entrance fee.

The greater the economic value of the animal killed, the greater the forgiveness possible. One needed enough money to play this game.

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All of this buying and selling diverted focus away from God to the animals and then to human-made coins.

Even the animals were graded. Only the unblemished were accepted – meaning they were caged throughout their lives and denied their God-given habitat.

For centuries the prophets railed against this. Recall the prophets Micah, Amos, or Zechariah saying God does not want your smelly sacrifice.

No one listened.

An important sidebar: This gospel and its reference to “the Jews” have been used to defend anti-Semitic beliefs and terrors. Any such reading distorts the gospel. The Temple authorities were caught in centuries of straying from humble practices.

Jesus and his disciples were all faithful Jews. The caution to me and all clergy is to remain humble to the gospel and not our own view of who is accepted and who is not and staunch our desire to create a sense of certainty.

The common currencies of the day, the denarii and drachma, could not be used in the Temple’s marketplace with the profane image of the emperor stamped into the object. The faithful exchanged those coins for temple coins to purchase animals.

In John’s gospel Jesus explodes with anger in his first public ministry. He overturns the tables, pours out coins, scatters sheep and cattle, and demands that those selling doves get them out: “stop making my Father’s house into a *marketplace*.” A more direct



translation from the Greek would be “stop making my Father’s house into a *market house*.”

The Temple represents God’s holy home, welcoming everyone, not some supermarket privileging coins over animals, and turning those who purchased them into pawns in some scheme to manipulate their access to the one who created them, loved them, and would redeem them.

“Destroy this temple,” Jesus says to the leaders who ask him for a sign, “and in three days I will raise it up.”

In John’s Gospel Jesus is not talking about changing the policies around who sells what and when. He spills out coins and overturns tables to destroy the very pillars of that temple’s existence through his very, eternal existence.

God has become one of us through the body of Jesus. No longer far off in the heavens, God pitched God’s tent among us.

This new temple Jesus promises is not made of precious stones but flesh and blood, which permits an intimate meeting, abiding with one another.

Bookend this first story of Jesus’ ministry with the final story of Jesus’ meal, shared amongst his disciples immediately before his death:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.”

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And Christ's command after his resurrection, "peace be with you, receive the Holy Spirit."

God's spirit pulses through all creation. God's divine image animates our flesh and blood. As surely as Jesus freed those caged animals, he freed us from bondage to such transactions, places or the dictates of others.

The birds' call in the morning awakens us, literally from sleep, and from sleeping through the grandeur of these creatures as they make their homes in our yards and trees.

Watching them rise in the skies and drift into branches prods me to wonder how they could possibly be caged for sacrifice rather than admired for displaying God's fingerprints in their bodies and movement.

British nature author, Helen MacDonald, writes of the tiny bird, the swift, calling them "magical in the manner of all things that exist a little beyond our understanding."

Once a young swift leaves its nest, it may remain in the sky for two or three years, bath in the rain, feed on insects, sleep with one eye shut while still flying, before touching down.

When swifts nest for their young, they find obscure places, dark and cramped spaces in the sky; beneath roof tiles or in church towers.

On warm summer evenings they gather in the sky, flying higher and higher, until they disappear from

view. These ascents are called *vesper flights*, after the Latin *vesper*, for evening and the final solemn prayer of the day. In the liminal space between light and dark, they re-group to find their bearings in the heavens.

Aviators and meteorologists track their movements, from feeding on insects over water to amassing at six hundred feet and then disappearing from view but measured at eight to ten thousand feet above the earth.

From this vantage point they expose themselves to a flow of wind that is unaffected by the earth. Gazing at the stars above and experiencing the future course of the weather, together, they determine where and how to move as a body.

MacDonald writes: “Stars, wind, polarized light, magnetic cues, the distant rumble of clouds a hundred miles out, clear cold air, and below them the hush of a world tilting towards sleep...They are quietly, perfecting orienting themselves.”

Ornithologists believe they follow the *many-wrongs principle*. They average all of their individual assessments in order to reach the best navigational decision.

The many-wrongs principle. The name sounds off-putting but the intent so compelling. Swifts know their lives depend upon being attuned to all of creation, being honest with one another, listening to one another, and ensuring the others’ survival.

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Left to the individual, it is likely to make a wrong decision. Pooling their wisdom reveals better choices.

MacDonald considers the swifts are highly instructive creatures for our lives: “Not everyone needs to climb each vesper flight, many swifts eschew the climb because they are tending eggs and young, while those that can do participate for their entire well-being. In our own communities, some of us are required by dint of flourishing life and the health of us all, to look clearly at the things that are so easily obscured by the everyday, share our knowledge...then set our courses.”<sup>2</sup>

How simple. As the day closes, draw together. Look to the heavens and all around. Listen to one another. In our vespers listen to scripture and to God.

In our vespers, accept we are capable of many-wrongs if left to our own devices. We tend to slip into believing we can control the course of events and even our relationship with God.

And in our vespers, accept the invitation to follow the one who made his home among us and will call us to abide with him in an eternal home.

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<sup>2</sup> Helen MacDonald, *Vesper Flights* (New York: Grove, 2020), 140-144. In addition to MacDonald's survey of the many-wrongs principle, the following article may satisfy curious minds: “Group navigation and the “many-wrongs principle” in models of animal movement,” National Center for Biotechnology Information, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17645033/>

## **A Story of Love**

gather round  
I have a story to tell  
of one who reached inside himself  
and took a handful of love  
like a pile of stardust  
and said: this is for you  
it is all you need  
it is all you will ever need  
there is enough here  
to change the whole world  
take it

many laughed at him  
mocked him  
and ignored the invitation

but some dared to take it  
and those who did  
noticed something about this love

they found they could do what the gift-giver could do  
they could stand with the lost  
welcome the traveler  
eat with the hungry

they found themselves doing what the man first did to them  
give something of themselves to others  
they became like the man  
offering themselves  
and as they offered themselves  
others took the invitation  
and many still do  
and many still trust  
it is enough to change the whole world

*~ written by Roddy Hamilton*



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