



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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An Unexpected Destination

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 4, 2018
The Third Sunday in Lent—Based on John 2:13-22*

Jewish Theologian and Philosopher Martin Buber wrote, “All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.”ⁱ

You save up and make a once-in-a-lifetime trip to a place far, far away, and you believe that arriving at the destination is the whole reason for going. And then you discover the trip has given you emotional space, psychic breathing room, a window from which to look out and see a new horizon. Now the journey becomes the destination and you find yourself changed, rehabilitated, restored. It's a fresh start.

Or you go deeper and deeper into a relationship, farther than you've ever gone before or even imagined going. And now you discover you've arrived at a place you've only heard about but never really quite believed in. A place of profound satisfaction and blessed joy. Here is a serenity you never bothered to pursue because this is a contentment you didn't even know existed!

We talk about the 40 days of Lent as a journey, as a spiritual pilgrimage. We talk about it as “the journey inward,” and we think we know what that is—what it will be like, where such a journey should take us, and how we should feel at the end of it. But there are secret destinations revealed to the pilgrim that are completely unexpected, hidden from our eyes. You can only find them by setting off on the journey.

Now, I often speak of transformation in my preaching. I believe a transformed faith, a transformed life, a transformed soul are the deepest objectives of the spiritual quest. But what exactly does that look like? What would that feel like?

Well, let us consider a glimpse into the heart of a middle-aged man in the third century C.E. His name is Cyprian and he's from Carthage in North Africa. Here Cyprian is writing to his friend, Donatus. “This seems a cheerful world, Donatus, when I view it from this fair garden under the shadow of these vines. But if I climbed some great mountain and looked out over the wide lands, you know very well what I would see. Brigands on the high roads, pirates on the seas; in the amphitheaters, men murdered to please applauding crowds; under all roofs, misery and selfishness. It is really a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad

world. Yet, in the midst of it, I have found a quiet and holy people. They have discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure in this sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians. And I am one of them.”ⁱⁱⁱ

“I am one of them.” Cyprian was drawn by a way of life he witnessed and then experienced. These quiet and holy people sparked in him a joy that he was compelled to share with his friend. In the beginning, the Christians he encountered must have been inexplicable to him. These afflicted people could not have been any more alien had they tried. Note that Cyprian doesn’t express outrage about their treatment or about their persecution and tortures, because they don’t express outrage about their treatment. And what’s up with that?

The love of Christ in Christian community transcends the treatment to which they are subjected. The faith community experiences a transcending, suffering love that gives them the strength to endure in order to serve the Lord their God, in order to continue on their journey. In Paul’s words, “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” It was C. S. Lewis who observed, “Every story of conversion is the story of a blessed defeat.”ⁱⁱⁱ The blessed defeat of a well-fortified defense mechanism by a constant, gentle spirit. The blessed defeat of one’s self-interest by a higher purpose. The blessed defeat of our darkest fear by a confidence in God’s power to overcome every adversary.

Episcopalian Madeleine L’Engle served as Writer in Residence at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. She’s the author of the beloved children’s book *A Wrinkle in Time* (which was just recently made into a movie). She wrote, “We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.” In other words, we show them a secret destination illumined by a light so lovely that anyone—indeed, everyone—wants to go in search of it, even if they do not comprehend the source of it. Yet even illumined in a divine light, there are still the shadows, without which we could not fully appreciate the light.

It was Martin Buber, again, who observed, “A person cannot approach the divine by reaching beyond the human. To become human is what this individual person has been created for.”^{iv} Jesus is fully God and fully human. He is not “beyond” human. His humanity can no more be cast away than his divinity, and Jesus, like every other human being on the planet, gets mad!

But Christians, you see, just have a heck of a time with anger. We really don’t know what to do with this emotion. We often repress it in such unhealthy ways that passive-aggressiveness runs nearly unrestrained in our communities. “Bless his or her heart” is faith-community code for a litany of profanities many “nice” Christians simply wouldn’t utter. Of course, another great passive-aggressive phrase is the infamous WASP epitaph,

“He said he was fine.” We might do well to remember that “fine” has two definitions. The first meaning is “okay,” and the second meaning is “pulverized.” Think about that the next time you tell someone you’re “fine.”

So the passage of scripture we’ve heard today, when Jesus cleanses the temple, is really challenging for us. He is not “fine.” And he is definitively not the “wimpy Jesus” of the saccharin piety some of us from the evangelical tradition grew up with. This is Jesus in an entirely different mode. (When I was a young manager at Eastman-Kodak, we were taught, “Don’t lose your temper; use your temper.” This is Jesus using his.) This is the fiery, righteous, and angry Jesus, who makes a whip of cords and drives all the money changers (along with all the cattle and the sheep and the doves and all of their sellers) straight out of the temple. This is the bright light of salvation that sends every form of darkness scattering to the four corners of the universe.

Just so we understand: “The temple represents the intersection of the Roman money market and the local economy, the spiritual idolatry of status quo power. It is the place of prayer which has been invaded by the clink of Roman coins changing hands. In driving the money-changers out, Jesus performs a kind of material exorcism.”^v

But is it okay for Jesus to be angry? And if Jesus is the one we seek to emulate, is it okay for us to be angry? Garret Keizer, Episcopal priest and author, expresses it this way: “I write in petulant resistance to the idea that anger is an emotion with no rightful place in the life of a Christian or in the emotional repertoire of any evolved human being.... The popular theology (most of it Gnostic) that portrays perfection as the shedding of every primitive instinct, and portrays God as an impersonal sanitizing spirit, is to my mind evidence of a satanic spirit. The Lord my God is a jealous God and an angry God, as well as a loving God and a merciful God. I am unable to imagine one without the other. I am unable to commit to any messiah who doesn’t knock over tables.”^{vi} And knocking over the tables is an act this Jesus is completely capable of doing.

“All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.” When we set out on the journey, we didn’t know where the journey would end... or what we would encounter along the way. Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” No one knew what that meant. No one had the first clue about what he was telling them. But “after he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word Jesus had spoken.” They had absolutely no idea what secret destinations awaited them.

Jesus continues to overturn the tables in the lives of those who seek to follow him.

“Cyprian questioned the meaning of truth and searched for it in the practice of law and rhetoric... He converted (to the Christian faith) at the age of 56 (A ripe old age in the 3rd century)...(Then) he sold all of his property... and was ordained a priest a year later... and (ordained) bishop two years after that. Dear old Cyprian had absolutely no idea what

destinations awaited him, either. Today St. Cyprian of Carthage is second in importance only to St. Augustine as a figure and Father of the African Church.”^{vii}

And do you remember what he wrote to his friend? “It is really a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. Yet, in the midst of it, I have found a quiet and holy people. They had discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure in this sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians... and I am one of them.”

Amen.

ⁱ Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 36

ⁱⁱ *Synthesis*, March, 2009,

ⁱⁱⁱ C.S. Lewis, *A Mind Awake*, New York, Harper One, reprinted 2017

^{iv} Martin Buber, *Hasidism & the Modern Man*, Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 15

^v Bill Wylie-Kellerman, *Sojourners*, The Cleansing of the Temple, Sojo.net, accessed March 1, 2018

^{vi} Garret Keizer, *The Enigma of Anger*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2004

^{vii} *Catholic News Herald*, St. Cyprian, updated February 12, 2018, accessed March 1, 2018
<http://www.catholicnews herald.com/faith/198-news/faith/faith-facts/344-black-catholic-popes-saints-and-leaders>