

# RANSOMED HEART

LOVE GOD. LIVE FREE.

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April 2011

Dearest Friends,

Back in December, I wrote you about the humanity of Jesus (the most human face of all). In January, I shared a bit on his playfulness (the fish-joke after the resurrection). February was his generosity (908 bottles at Cana!). This fall I will release a book on Jesus, called *Beautiful Outlaw*. You're gonna love it – love *him*! Since this is what I've been working on, I thought I'd share a bit more this month – on his fierce intention.

Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” (Matthew 16:23)

Hold on now – this doesn't sound very playful. What are we to make of the sudden mood changes that erupt from Jesus like thunder from a clear sky?

For some reason we keep forgetting that Jesus is operating in enemy territory. We project into the Gospel stories a pastoral backdrop, the quaint charm of a Middle East travel brochure – picturesque villages, bustling markets, smiling children – and Jesus wandering through it all like a son coming home from college. We forget the context of his life and mission. His story begins with *genocide* – the massacre of the innocents, Herod's attempt to murder Jesus by ordering the systematic execution of all young boys around Bethlehem. I've never seen this included in any crèche scene, ever. Who could bear it?

God the Father, knowing this is about to strike, sends an angel to warn Joseph. The little family flees the country under cover of darkness, like fugitives. Why must they run for their lives? It ought to make you think twice about how God goes about his plans in this world. But let us continue with the facts – an angel in the night, a flight in the dark, hiding south of the border like outlaws. Surely you see that Jesus was a *hunted* man?

We cannot understand his actions, nor taste the richness of his personality until we set them within context – the man is operating deep behind enemy lines. This colors his extraordinary movements across the pages of the Gospels and helps to strip away that benevolent religious fog that continues to creep into our reading. It also gives depth and poignancy to moments of self-disclosure such as, “The Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” Because he was hunted.

But is it not truer to say that he is the Hunter?

As Jesus steps out from behind those thirty years of almost total obscurity into the task set before him, both men and demons begin to feel his fierce intention:

In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 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. He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!” (John 2:14-16)

In three verses he empties the Temple, a report that reads like a crack of a bullwhip. But take the action slowly. First, Jesus takes the time to make a weapon. Where did he get these cords? Having found them, he had the patience and forethought to weave them together effectively to make a usable whip – he knows what it takes to move large, sedentary cattle and self-righteous profiteers. There's time enough here to cool off if this is merely an outburst of anger. But no, this is a planned and sustained aggression. (Particularly unsettling for pacifists.)

The livestock would have been kept in some sort of corral; they would have been standing for hours, languid, sleepy. An angry man flying upon them with a whip would ignite panic. Mass panic. Animals feed upon each other's fear in seconds. Picture cattle and sheep running for their lives, crashing down the corrals, their hooves sliding frantically on the tiles, making them even more desperate. We have a stampede here.

It then says he *poured out* the coins of the money changers and sent their tables tumbling. How easy is it to move carefully and quickly from a sitting position while removing your legs from the table that is being overturned in front of you? More panic. He *dumps* the coins, scatters them. This is explosive. You've probably had a small handful of change fall off a counter – they burst in every direction like a jar of marbles.

Now, layer all this together. The animals would have panicked in every direction, their keepers running after them, shouting, trying to get control, which only incinerates the panic. Add the greedy money changers scrambling around on the ground grasping at their careening coins. Imagine the *noise* – bellowing of frightened livestock mingled with the crashing of corrals, tables, coins, and the angry shouts of the incensed men. Over this, the shouts of Jesus. It is absolute pandemonium. Someone screaming “fire” in a casino would not be far from the reality.

Could a small, unintimidating figure accomplish such a sustained riot? To pull off “driving all from the temple area” would require more than a few seconds and repeated blows. This is a sustained assault. Jesus is a locomotive, a juggernaut. For all practical purposes here, he is the bull in the china shop. But is this the Jesus of our worship songs? The religious fog sneaks in with lines comparing him to, “...a rose trampled on the ground.” Helpless, lovely Jesus. Vegetarian, pacifist, tranquil. O, wait – that was Gandhi. Not Jesus.

Can you picture Gandhi or Buddha storming into the polling place of a local election, shouting, overturning tables, sending the participants fleeing? This is a breathtaking quality – *especially* when compared to our present age where doubt masquerades as humility, passivity cloaks as rest, and emasculated indecision poses as laid-back enlightenment.

O Jesus could be soft, and he certainly was humble, but his fierce intentionality is riveting to watch. And this is our Jesus. Love that is stronger than death. Someone you can trust with your life, trust to fight for you.

It makes me love him even more.

  
John