

Mixed Message

Luke 19:28-40; Luke 21:33-38

Palm/Passion Sunday, March 28, 2010

Whitefish UMC

- † Pastors like to swap stories about funny things that happen on special days in church. When it comes to Palm Sunday, there's a lot to work with—usually involving children. We each have our own tales about little skirmishes that break out amongst the palm branches. One little boy found himself directly behind the pulpit and couldn't see his parents—or anything other than the microphone—and discovered that if he hit the microphone with his palm branch, it made a sound like a small mortar explosion, which he beat in time to the hymn “All Glory, Laud, and Honor,” until a minister tackled him and wrenched the branch from his tightly clenched fist.
- † As it is for us in our worship today, most Sunday School classes learn special songs that the children sing for Palm Sunday. (I learned one when I was little that I still know by heart.) One little boy, though, got a little confused by the difficult word “Hosanna” and sang instead, “O Hosanna, now don't you cry for me. I'm goin to Louisiana with a banjo on my knee.”
- † It's good to begin the message for today with humor, so that the rest of the story doesn't seem so grim. Most people want to rush through this next week and go from one joyous celebration to another, which is why the church now asks us to read scripture about both the Palm Sunday parade and the story of the crucifixion on this day. One pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey, remembers the “Grab and Go Palms.”

- † The pastor was standing in the doorway of the church, saying goodbye to the last of the Palm Sunday worshippers. His church sits right in the middle of town, on the main street. A car stopped at the red light in front of the church, and a young woman jumped out of passenger seat, sprinted up the steps, and said, breathlessly, “Father, can I get some palms? We just have to have them every year.”
- † So the pastor handed her the last few wilted leftovers. She grabbed them and rushed back to the car with her palm fronds in hand. “I don’t think they even missed the green light,” the pastor said.
- † The Grab and Go Palms story is symbolic of the mixed message of Palm/Passion Sunday. For today is a day of ambiguity and ambivalence. The parade is a joyful memory of triumph and celebration, but it’s only part of the story. It is a day of deep irony: celebration, but also betrayal, denial, and five days later an execution.
- † A famous painting by Jacobo Tintoretto, called The Crucifixion, is considered one of the greatest paintings in the world. It hangs in a church in Venice and features a whole village of ordinary Renaissance-era people going about their daily business—buying, selling, shopping, working, children playing, dogs and cats. Over in a corner, a donkey, perhaps the very one the crucified, dying Christ in the center of the painting rode so triumphantly five days before, is eating a palm frond.
- † Luke’s gospel, the one we read today, begins the dramatic story of the last week of Jesus’ life with Jesus’ going ahead of his disciples, up into Jerusalem. Remember that he is coming from the place where he knew he was relatively safe and going, against his friends’ advice, to the capital city, the seat of power. Despite the danger, he is going into Jerusalem to

celebrate the Passover and God's deliverance of the people Israel from slavery in Egypt.

- † Jesus won't be alone in the city—it will be filled with pilgrims and with Roman soldiers trying to keep the peace in a tumultuous time. It will be a happy, noisy occasion that is also very volatile with political undercurrents—resentment of Rome by most of the Jews, and a determination by Roman authorities and their Jewish collaborators to control the crowds.
- † Jesus wants to send a message, and so he asks his disciples to bring a colt, not a war horse and a stallion, for him to ride into the city. He will come as a king of peace, not of war, but the crowd still expects great things, including their liberation from Rome, of him. They throw their cloaks onto the ground in front of him, cheering and praising God, led by the disciples who give thanks for all that they have seen Jesus do for the people.
- † Uneasy, some Pharisees who have gone to see what all the commotion is about caution Jesus and try to get him to stop the disciples and the crowd. And yet, sensing the inevitable, Jesus refuses, saying that all creation cries for liberation and peace.
- † You know the rest of the story. Jesus turns over the tables in the temple, sealing his fate. He gathers with his disciples in the upper room for the Passover meal and the last supper. After the meal and washing the feet of his disciples, he goes to Gethsemane to pray, where he is abandoned by his closest friends. There he is betrayed by one of them, arrested, and taken away to be tried by the Jewish collaborators, the Sanhedrin, who have been looking for an excuse to get rid of him.
- † Now Rome steps in directly and orders his execution. A few years ago, Mel Gibson and his Passion of the Christ film portrayed the last hours of Jesus'

life. The posters and theatrical trailers all said something like “He lived for this....” For Mel Gibson, and many other Christians, Jesus’ crucifixion was/is the main event—the preordained sacrifice of a sinless Christ for the sins of the world.

- † There’s no getting around the core of this theology: God killed Jesus so that we could have the death sentence we deserve paid for instead by Jesus, who sets us free by taking our death sentence upon himself. It was God’s will that Jesus died, and for this we should be grateful.
- † Dorothee Soelle, a famous German theologian who died in 2003, came to the seminary I attended one day and said some shocking words to us. Believing that God willed that Jesus be executed is theological sadism, she said, and it means we worship an executioner. Although we squirmed in our seats, most of us had to admit that we had trouble worshipping a God that would punish his own son by killing him. Isn’t this the same Prodigal Father, so full of grace that he welcomes his errant child home and has a party? What happened, then?
- † Barbara Brown Taylor has written a book called God in Pain, and I make it a practice to read it every year as Holy Week approaches. She tells of an eighteenth century German tapestry that hangs in a Jesuit monastery in Germany. It portrays the binding of Isaac by Abraham. You remember that story, don’t you? God commands Abraham to take his beloved son Isaac to be sacrificed to test Abraham’s faith. At the last moment, Isaac is spared.
- † The tapestry features a plump angel hovering above Isaac, who is about to be killed by father Abraham with a flintlock rifle. The little angel pees a high arc onto the firing pin of the gun. Below him you can read the legend, “Abraham, you aim in vain. An angel sends a little rain.”

- † Taylor says, “Where was Jesus’ angel? That’s what I want to know. Where was an angel with a flaming sword, to pry him loose and spirit him away? Even a voice would have done. ‘Stop this right now. You are about to make a terrible mistake.’ Only there was no voice, no angel, no interruption in the proceedings.
- † As God remained silent, Jesus hung there while the life drained out of him and then he died, a young man with half his life left ahead of him. Maybe that is why we call it the will of God—simply because it happened. If God had not willed it, it would not have happened. Only that assumes a universe in which there are no other powers operating besides the power of God, and I am not so sure about that.”
- † You’ve probably observed that there is plenty going on in the world that might not conform to God’s will, right? Well, from the very beginning, God has shared power with us, giving us power to name, create, choose, and act. We have done wonderful things **with that gift and we have done terrible things with that gift.**
- † **“The dark side of our power is the power to resist God—to say no to God’s yes and to thwart the divine will.”** I wish I could tattoo that statement into the vision of our youth and everybody else I love, including myself, when we are about to make a stupid choice that will hurt ourselves and others.
- † And yet many of us blame God when things turn out badly—we aren’t really in control—God is in charge, and when things get bad enough God ought to come back into the situation and set everything right. And if God doesn’t set things right, then there is no God—I hear that a lot.

- † But what if that isn't how it works? What if God has accepted limited power so that we can be in partnership with God, although we also have the power to resist relationship with God as well?
- † Isn't it possible that God's will for Jesus was a long and blessed life, and that his early death was caused not by God but by resistance to God's will by everyone from the religious authorities to the Roman government, with acquiescence by many people?
- † The second part of the scripture that we read this morning reminds us that those same authorities and even the criminals executed on either side of Jesus mocked Jesus by asking him when God would intervene to stop the execution. But Jesus would not stop being who he was. At any point along the way, it's clear that Jesus could have avoided the cross. He could have stopped helping other people and helped himself instead. But he didn't.
- † Peter would deny Jesus, but Jesus didn't deny his true self, which emptied out in ultimate love. And yes, that love is sacrificial—given without regard to the cost, to his life itself. He could have saved his life, but as he said to his disciples and says to us, to have done so would have meant losing, betraying, it.
- † Taylor says it better than I could: “If the cross was in any sense the defeat of God's will, then it was also the perfection of it, as one beloved human being chose to bear the consequences of being who he was and died with the same integrity he had lived. Insofar as it was the will of God that he live like that, then God's will included the possibility of his death—not as something God desired but as something God suffered.
- † Christianity is the only world religion that confesses a God who suffers. It is not all that popular an idea, even among Christians. We prefer a God who prevents suffering, only that is not the God we have got. What the cross

teaches us is that God's power is not the power to force human choices and end human pain. It is instead the power to pick up the shattered pieces and make something holy out of them—not from a distance but right close up.”

† So we worship not the executioner, but the suffering God who will not let us remain in suffering and death. Instead our God takes the suffering into God's self and transforms it into life—that is the redemption of the cross.

† Yes, we'd rather have it the other way, or would we? Have you seen the movie “God on Trial?” It's about a group of Jews in Auschwitz who were so angry and disillusioned that they put God on trial. They charged God with cruelty and betrayal. They formed a court with prosecutors and defenders and heard good arguments on all sides. After deliberating, the rabbi stood up to announce the unanimous verdict: guilty as charged. But then he said, “Now let us go pray.” And they did. And so must we.

† Finally, let's close our morning of mixed messages with this lovely poem by Steve Garnaas-Holmes, “Triumphal Entry”:

His “triumphal entry,” they call it,
riding into the city on a donkey.
Listen, you can tell where this is going
just by looking at him.
Dust of the roads on his feet,
speckled by sinners' tears.
The smell of fish and baking bread,
incense and lepers on his clothes,
blood on the hem of his garment,
the frame of a man who walks a lot.
Rough knees and kind hands.
Eyes that sparkle with sadness,

everyone's sadness, taking it all in,
and a smile that weeps with you,
that knows a world's sorrow
without telling, and a world's joy.
See how he notices the burdened ones,
the weepers and limpers,
the crutched and shunned ones,
old ones who hover in doorways,
a ragman collecting shame and shadows,
and those who live in them,
how it seems as if he's gathering names?
Feel that wind? This praise is a spring snow:
it will soon vanish into what we really mean.
These are his royal subjects,
the cast-off and mangled,
possessed and dispossessed.
He draws these tatters and disasters into a kingdom,
rides his patient donkey down the road,
down into the crowd where it opens like a wound,
resolutely down into the tragedy and our longing
where we feed on him and he is with us.
No threats can stop him,
no force, no cross deter him from this,
(and not some aftermath) his hope, his throne,
his triumph.

† Enter into this Holy Week with the mystery of this mixed message. Pray.
Give thanks. Amen.

Sources:

Steve Garnaas-Holmes, “Triumphal Entry” *Unfolding Light*, Tuesday, March 23, 2010.

Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain*. 1998.

John Buchanan, “Crucified,” <http://fourthchurch.org>