

## Becoming Who You Are... To Die For

Palm Sunday

March 20, 2005

Readings: Isaiah 50: 4-9; Luke 19: 28-44

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As this worship service closes today, we will be singing "Ride on! Ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp, ride on to die . . ." I have no desire to reset the words of that great hymn, but for our understanding, let us question whether Jesus' Palm Sunday plan was to "ride on to die." We've probably been told sometime or other that Jesus went to Jerusalem in order to die. The idea is that if he hadn't made that sacrifice, there could be no salvation through him, so in obedience he did ride on to die. But as the officer says when he decides not to give you a ticket for a moving violation: "Just slow down when you come through here again." Well, we are coming through here again. Let's slow down.

Jesus, fully human, wouldn't have been fully human, or at least not a fully healthy human, if he had intended to die at week's end. There's a word for "intending to die": suicide. The "sui-" in suicide means "self." The self is at the center in suicide. Jesus' life is precisely the opposite of suicide: not self at center, seeing no way, no life, no truth; but the Center--God--at self, becoming the way, the life, the truth. Jesus is not looking at what will happen at week's end. (If you're curious about that, by the way, come back to the all our services in this coming week.) So the inner music of Jesus on Palm Sunday is not a dirge; the joyful Church got that right. He does not ride on to die. He rides on to become what he is.

We come to the end of our forty days of Lent with the same theme we met in the wilderness at the first: how we become who we are. In Jesus' testing by the devil, we saw that temptation helped Jesus to discover and define his divine vocation. He began to become who he was. You too, we said. Now, peasants line the dusty road, amazed at the street theater playing out before them. They know, or at least some of them know, that Jesus' donkey comes right out of a script in the Bible, in Zechariah 9:

9.9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. 10 He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

They know that whoever started shouting a fragment of Psalm 118--"Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD"--was singing exactly the right tune for this play. And some of them are smiling at the fun pun ambling down the street, combining urgent need and perfect answer, for Hosanna! means "Save us"--and the name "Jesus" means "God saves!" Jesus is playing long-awaited King. According to the Bible script, this King is like no other. He is going to make peace among all the nations by destroying all the armaments and military gear at his disposal. Not even David tried that--and no leader of any nation has ever tried it since--but Jesus is playing the part full out as if this is the most important stage in the world. He is not riding on to die. But he does know what he would die for, and for that he is willing to play the joyous, funny, humble, thunderous part called King on the Donkey. They've been waiting hundreds of years for someone with the heart for the part.

They needed someone who knows himself. No false self is in the way, no pretensions here. This is not a statesman behind whose serious roles one might see a different side of Jesus, up close and personal. No, he is all together. He is completely committed. His vocation and his identity are one. And so he plays his life to the full, as a parable of the Kingdom.

Do you know your vocation? Do you know what you are willing to die for? That question has an awfully dramatic sound for ordinary Americans. Most of us never think twice about it until the doctor tells us we have to change, or die. Millions of Americans are apparently willing to die for their bad habits. Now, for you from Liberia or Sierra Leone, things have probably not been so light. Perhaps some of you have faced a moment's decision on what you are willing to die for, and what you are not willing to die for. But though our experiences differ, we can all walk this road to great advantage. Consider.

In my last year of high school, my English teacher had her small class of bright, college-bound students to her house for a meal and a class. It was an evening in May. Graduation neared. Possibility shimmered in the night air. I remember the home, on a corner not far from my own. And this, but nothing else: Fred, my teacher's husband, spoke to us. This probably wasn't planned. He talked about military service in the Pacific during World War II; about his orders to keep his soldiers from ever talking about certain things--the fear of death, the enemy as a human, moral questions about war and killing. From somewhere in the heart of darkness, Fred finally asked us teenagers--new-borns, you might say: "Do you know what you are willing to die for?" No answers came, of course. Sitting there by the grand piano in the living room, he said only a little more: "Until you find out what you will die for, you have no idea who you are, or what on earth you are here for."

These words felt true to me, though we could do no more than commit them to memory then. But I have been working those words out in the fabric of my life--often by failing--and I call them true words still. We needn't stumble

into confusion over the apparent drama of the words. It is obvious that in societies with relatively stable politics, people rarely sacrifice their body and breath to a cause, so let's push that part of the equation to the back of the shelf. Instead of "to die for" perhaps we should think "laid down for." Is your life laid down for something? Or is it a career?

Consider the distinction between vocation and career. "Career" derives from the word to run in Latin. Careening and careering down the highway of life. Our culture especially prizes this way of running life, seeming to be in command, seeking whatever crumbs of money and recognition the social milieu will offer you. Throughout our Lenten series, we have called these the interests of the false self. In our career, we don't really run things, however; things run us--most of all, the need of society to remain the same, the same, the same, which need is well fed by our career selves. A career is a sacrifice of a life into the gaping mouth of the old world of pleasures and violence. It's not necessarily a bad experience. It's just not what God had in mind in calling you.

Vocation is the response you make to lay down your life for a word that is coming to you from the future, from possibility--from the kingdom, as Christians sometimes call it. Think of career as continually rolling out the carpet of your life, always pushing at the edge, fretting, pressed for time, uncertain. Vocation is laying your very self down on a carpet that seems already in place. The work of vocation is on your self, to shape yourself to the mystery of God's word in your heart. With our careers, the work is done on the external world, to try to make it fit us. To know what you are willing to die for is to know your vocation, not so much "who you are" as "whose you are." Career is dead serious. It is the mind of a literalist applied to the hours and the days, the weeks and the years--I had better roll my carpet . . . th. . . that way, or I will be miserable.

Vocation is never so anxious about tomorrow. Vocation puts the mind of an artist in play. Time is clay. Vocation has absolute faith that she has no appointment with misery, ever, no matter how this thing plays out. Why, knowing his vocation, a man might mount a donkey, laughing, for the sake of the world. Career looks back, and embroiders an image of identity out of all the things I've done and failed to do. The world confirms our picture, and works hard to keep us from adding one new, unusual thread to the fabric. But when we are listening to our vocation, we lay the whole garment of our self down, again and again, to receive a new pattern and weave in new threads. "The past is over and gone. You are a new creature." This is what it means to be willing to die: to be willing to go where you are called. That's how Jesus got on that donkey--he was willing to go where the Eternal was calling. To Jerusalem.

What is your Jerusalem vocation? To ride humbly into the city of forgiveness? To stand in the temple of your family or your workplace for justice? To play marvelously with time, like an artist, opening doors of hospitality to

strangers? To go teach what you know in the temple, and to learn what you do not at temples you'd never attended?

Smart, quick answers to these questions never come, or never matter if they do. Vocation arises to awareness from a discipline that consists of three actions, braided in an order that seems given from on high. First, vocation arises from Silence. Then from Word. Then in Action. Silence: in which you lay down your life, seeking nothing. Word, in which you communicate with ("make yourself one with") a few others on the way. Action, in which you engage the materials of being with the light given you from on high, and learn. And fall silent, again. And prepare for communication. And act. This is how "thy Kingdom comes on earth"--just as it is in heaven. From the future, God calls out the present.

Jesus invited the future to break forth upon him each day of his ministry. The gospel portrait shimmers with elegance and power for the report of it. He laid down his life like a parable, like a master artist on the world's best canvas. Even to the end. And so there is no end. And he is calling you to follow.

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