

PALM READING

Texts on Sunday, April 1, 2007

Habakkuk 2: 2-11

Luke 19: 28-48

The Palm Sunday painting most of us have had in mind since childhood pictures Jesus waving from his perch in parade, a bower of stately palms above and a street strewn with palms below as he enters Jerusalem. But the action starts a mile or two outside the city, according to Luke, “as Jesus was approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives.” And it starts long before this day. Without your Older Testament tucked firmly in your memory, you’re going to get the wrong idea about Palm Sunday. You’ll think it’s what you would feel: happy about Jesus—happy to love him; the man of marvels come from Galilee to the big city for an engagement. But that’s not it. They are excited because they think that with this man, they’re finally going to get to go to war against the evil empire, Rome. This path down the Mount of Olives and up into Jerusalem was the very path King David used to take this city by force of arms, not once but twice. What Jew does not yearn this day for a descendant of David to take the city by force again? Why else are they shouting *Ho-san-na!* “Save us now! Save us now!”

There is a quirky problem: he is on a donkey. A commander should be on a horse or a chariot. We expect our commanders in military parade to turn the corner in an Abrams tank, but this guy is riding a bicycle; no, even lower than a bike, if you can imagine it. Actually, he is turning a page of the Bible into a living stage. One person in our Wednesday Bible study put it perfectly: Jesus is doing street theater. He knows they want war, but he is moved by a word of the prophets never realized. “The king—triumphant and victorious he—humble and riding on a donkey.” Zechariah 9.9! Jesus didn’t stumble into that prophecy blind; he chose it; he picked it up from the dustbin and put it on, like a play. He takes control of Israel’s story to take it somewhere new. Do they get it? Do we? Surely Jesus knows how Zechariah’s theme develops in the next verse: “Your king will cut off the chariot and the war horse and the bows and the arrows from Jerusalem; he will command peace to all nations.” Do they get it? Do we?

Whoever in that crowd remembers Zechariah is thinking, *You’ve got to love this guy: he’s funny, he’s fast, he’s playing one of the oldies.* What energy, what imagination! They throng to take part in the spectacle. Someone shout-sings a line from Psalm 118: “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” It’s another oldie: the hymn they used in ancient days when a new king was about to be crowned in the temple. But there’s been no king here for 600 years. Someone remembers the rest of that psalm: “Bind the festival procession with branches up to the altar.” So, tearing palm fronds from the trees, they throw them and twist them into a pretty path up to the temple for Jesus and his wonky donkey.

But the clergy are annoyed. You see why. They have an arrangement with the evil empire that keeps the church doors open. This crowd crowing for combat and a commander will bring down ruin on them all. “Settle the crowd, Jesus. This is too hot.” But Jesus calls up one more old scripture that hasn’t meant anything to anyone for centuries. You heard him say, “If these were silent, the very stones would cry out.” Here is the whole passage he was quoting. We see Jesus’ full message to the clergy and to the empire:

Write the vision; write it big and plain, so that someone could read it on the run. For this vision-message is a witness, pointing to what is coming . . . Note well: Money deceives. The arrogant rich don’t last . . . Who do you think you are—getting rich by stealing and extortion? How long do you think you can get away with this? How long before your

victims stand up and make you the victim? You've plundered nation after nation. Now you'll get a taste of your own medicine. Who do you think you are, acting like king of the mountain, above it all, above trials and troubles? By ruining other nations, you have engineered the ruin of your own house. You've undermined your foundations. Against you, the very stones will cry out from the wall." (Hab 2: 2-11 *The Message*)

Now, says Luke, Jesus came near and saw the city, and he wept over it. "If you, even you, had only known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." And then Jesus pronounced his own oracle of doom on all he saw. Why, this old, old story is leaping to life as if no one had read it for a hundred years. Jesus is weeping over Washington and Baghdad and Kirkuk; over Tehran and New York and Darfur. Palm Sunday is the overture to a symphony about arrogant empire descending into violence. I wish it was about something else, because you probably don't like having your Palm Sunday party crashed like this. But if we said it was about what we wished, we wouldn't be reading God's Word.

In the old days, people thought that every calamity was brought by God as punishment for bad behavior. We don't believe that anymore. We have to laugh at those modern-day preachers who claim that Katrina was God's sign of wrath against assorted misbehaviors. But then, what *are* we to make of the wrath of God in the midst of the evils of empire and oppression? Is God powerless to check the violence and arrogance of wealthy nations? Can we make sense of *both* the Old Testament vision that God brings the rich and the powerful low, and our understanding that humans have free will, which means that God does not invade the skulls of his creatures to cause them to do good or ill? I ask my Old Testament college course this question. Might both be so, God's wrath *and* our truly free will? If so, the answer would have to run something like this.

It is in the nature of God to let human greed run on to its limit. And it is in the nature of God's human creatures to tolerate pain for a long time, but not forever. After seventy years of oppression, the Soviet Union just fell apart. America began in 1789 after much violence at the end of a long period of oppression. We ran on, greedily inflicting our own terrible woes on the black race for about seventy years before civil war crashed down to right that wrong. Another seventy years of wealth and greed passed, and our entire economy collapsed into the Great Depression. Now another seventy years has passed, and America has risen to a pinnacle of power never seen on Earth. Can it go on for ever?

When the Palm Sunday crowd thinks so, Jesus weeps. When they are glad for combat and a commander, as we were just four years ago, Jesus weeps. "If you, even you, had only known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." It isn't that God or humanity has set the timer on oppression at precisely seventy years. But it is that a timer is set in the restlessness of human greed and human need. And it is that we would be fools, like all the other foolish empires that preceded ours, to think that the Palm Sunday oracles of natural divine hatred for oppression do not apply to us.

I don't intend to rehearse America's wrongs—or rights—today. Let us rather rehearse "the things that make for peace" in a world of disastrous change, for a reckoning is surely coming. Does it even matter to guess at the cause, whether our greed will show up as disastrous climate change, or the collapse of financial markets, or war over oil? The real question is, When things grow really hard, how will you serve? How well will your faith serve you when you can't afford your tank? Will you take the donkey? If your job went missing, if mortgages failed up and down the street, are you prepared for the things that make for peace within yourself? Or would your inner turmoil add to the world's war? If your children had no new toys or spiffy clothes, could they handle it? Could you handle them? Those of you who lived through the Great Depression know that there is a spiritual answer to these questions. But you see also that it has been a good seventy years since our nation had any practice in these things that make for peace.

Do you lash out whenever you are offended? Do you sulk and sound peevish when you're hurt? Does an uncertain future depress you, so that you withdraw into your unhappy thoughts? Then you are not yet ready for the things that make for peace in a world of disastrous change. You are not yet following Jesus. You have not made the break with your old self, who was put to death in your baptism. This condition of unreadiness is not a problem in itself. We are all unready, more or less. The problem comes when the things that make for peace are hidden from our eyes—that is, when we deny that now is the time to get ready to be baptized with Christ into his death; that this is the hour to begin teaching our children to follow that donkey down. “When you were baptized into Christ,” Paul says, “you were baptized into his death.” Jesus promises—promises!—that his disciples will share this baptism of death with him.

“Baptism betokens a breach,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*.

The breach has been effected by Christ long since, and in baptism [this breach] is effected in our own lives. We are now deprived of our direct relationship with all God-given realities of life. The baptized Christian has ceased to belong to the world. He is no longer its slave. She belongs to Christ alone. The breach with the world is complete. It demands and produces the death of the old self . . . a gift of grace no one can ever accomplish by herself.” (257)

As you witness once more the gracious act of baptism into Christ's death this Palm Sunday, commit yourselves to learn and to know the things that make for peace. For if we Christians will not live as if we have already died to our old and greedy self, we cannot serve this unhappy, desperately empty world. But take up your cross and follow me with joy, says the Lord. “The object of Jesus' command is always the same—to evoke our wholehearted faith, to make us love God and our neighbor with all our heart and soul.” (*Cost*, 252) This is the thing that makes for peace. May you have long life reading this Palm Sunday.

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