

Palm/Passion Sunday 2007: The Gospel According to Luke
The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson. Rector

For as long as I can remember I have participated in a dramatic reading of the Gospel on Palm Sunday like the one we just read—as a child and young adult growing up in a United Methodist Church and for almost twenty years as an ordained person. Although I’ve not preached on it twenty times (since most of my ordained life I’ve been part of a staff where the preaching has been shared) I have probably preached on the Passion of Christ a dozen or more times. So you would think I would know it by now.

I do know that I have both heard and preached sermons about the *fickleness* of the crowd. And I would even venture to say that there may have been a good sermon somewhere in there. People are fickle—easily swayed to and fro—that sermon goes. But it is truly amazing how the crowd that greets Jesus amid shouts of “hosanna” can so quickly turn to shouts of “crucify him.” There is truth in such a sermon, I think. You and I need to own our part in the death of Jesus and we need to own our own fickleness.

But this year I read a line in a commentary by two credible scholars about the last days of Jesus’ life that caused a seismic shift in my thinking. I’ve thought a lot about what they said and I’m convinced they are right—and it generates a whole bunch of new sermons—all of which I promise I won’t preach today. And it generates a bit of embarrassment about some earlier ones.

The scholars insist that the crowds are different—not the same. That the image is like a protest and a counter-demonstration—both are “crowds” but these crowds are comprised of different people who choose to stand in very different places.

The argument goes like this: the crowd that greets Jesus as the messiah, entering the city gates on a donkey and laying down their coats and palm branches and shouting hosanna are what Luke actually calls today “a multitude of disciples.” They are people from Galilee and people who have joined Jesus along the way from Nazareth to Jerusalem. They are people who do get what he is about, people who are tired of Roman imperial domination, and people who have staked their hopes on Jesus. He has energized them because they see in him the dawn of a new day. In a sense they provide him with protection from the authorities when he enters the city—because the last thing that the authorities want on their hands is a riot. Authorities don’t mind abusing their power but they prefer to do it in the dark rather than the light of day. No one, not even brutal dictators, want to deal with Tiananmen Square except as a last, anxious, resort.

In contrast, the crowd that comes at night—the one led by Judas Iscariot and then gathers in Pilate’s garden later that night—according to these scholars that crowd is a much smaller crowd representing the established imperial power. They are there for the cameras if I can say it that way. There to make it look like this is legit.

We need a degree of humility when we try to figure out what happened at a trial in Worcester or Boston last Tuesday—not to mention a trial that happened two thousand years ago halfway around the world. But bear with me and let’s suppose these scholars have it right—that the

crowds are different. Part of what that does, for me at least, is to remind me of the politics of it all. And for me that makes it all the more real—and all the more relevant to our lives.

One way of telling the Christian story focuses on the death of Jesus—Jesus died, the story goes, for you and for me. God sent Jesus into the world to *atone* for our sins. It’s all about the cross—the central symbol of our faith.

Another way of telling the Christian story focuses on Jesus’ ministry—on his life and his healing power and his teachings. Jesus shows us how to live, this story reminds us—how to live abundantly, how to live without fear.

But what happens when we dare to connect those two stories? To do that means a willingness to let go of our theological agendas—to let go of our ideologies on both the right and on the left. It means being willing to entertain a new, and perhaps richer, story. What happens if we hear the story something like this:

This rabbi from the north comes riding into Jerusalem utilizing imagery and language from the Old Testament that encourages people to see him as the long-awaited Messiah. He is a faithful Jew, a prophetic figure, a rabbi—who knows full well what is going to happen when he comes riding into town on a colt. For a good Jew standing there it would have been impossible not to remember the days of Elisha the prophet, when Jehu was anointed king for the sole purpose of overthrowing King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and they laid their garments down on the ground before him. (2 Kings 9:13)

In other words, Jesus is challenging the status quo. What we just remembered as we walked around the church is a political protest against Caesar’s power. In so doing, Jesus is challenging the Orwellian claims of the Pax Romana—which in reality is no peace. So, also, he is challenging the Jerusalem authorities who have been co-opted by Roman imperial power.

Imagine that as Jesus rides into town he is playing the media—because he wants a confrontation. Because who he is as teacher and healer and rabbi is about challenging the powers of this world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. Imagine that our little parade is like the march in Selma—namely that it is a direct challenge to coercive and abusive power—and the people are not only singing “All Glory Laud and Honor” but “We Shall Overcome.”

The authorities respond the same way they do in every generation when they feel threatened. Jesus in this narrative is not a passive victim—not sent to die as if we could be anywhere or anyplace—but sent to live in a world bent on death and destruction. So the conflict and the results are as inevitable as they always are when truth speaks to power. The powerful get angry-angry enough to kill. Death tries to destroy life. Those who speak for justice are silenced.

Imagine, also, that the second “crowd” that comes with Judas Iscariot is not the same folks at all, but people invested in silencing all dissenters; frightened people invested in

the status quo—people who refuse to change—people who want to hold onto the power they have at all costs.

Now in this telling we may well still find ourselves in both crowds, at different points in our lives perhaps. We aren't "off the hook;" and we still sometimes shout "crucify him!" We may at times be courageous and standing with Jesus and at times frightened and desperate. But the point in this telling of the story is not about our fickleness. The point here is about discernment, and courage, and the costs of discipleship. How do we open ourselves up to the possibility of liberation—of new and abundant life—rather than responding in fear and anger? How do we find new ways to stand with Jesus and what he is doing in the world—rather than retreating in fear?

In such a telling of the story, it becomes clearer that Jesus is put to death for a reason. It is not an accident that he dies. He provokes the powers of this world to do their best. And they do to him what they always do to the prophets; they kill him.

Except that here is the thing: in the end they cannot silence him. They can only kill him; but they cannot keep him dead. This weekend is not the end of the story; it's just the beginning. There is so much more to say. The mystery of faith is not simply that Christ has died.

Now, to hear the rest, you have to come back next weekend. Better still, come back on Thursday, and Friday, and Saturday as we ponder anew what God in Christ has done.

But let me offer you a sneak preview at least. The story isn't over. Death doesn't get the final word. Deceit and cover-ups and lies and corruption can never get the final word. Eventually the truth comes out. Eventually love wins.

The heart of this story is that the power of love will always win over the love of power—even when it doesn't seem that way in the short term. In the end, the love of God made known in Jesus is stronger than all the tanks and firehoses and bombs of this world. Remember that as you continue the journey through this week. Hold onto truth, and love. They make for alternative endings to the story. They make all things possible. They make all things new.

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