

“What Do You See?”

A Sermon for the People of Seaside Community Church

Luke 19: 28-48

March 28, 2010

I am glad to be back with you as we journey through this Holy Week together. I want to reiterate how impressed I am by how God has arranged our time together. We have had an “interim” before the Interim! And when your new, official, Interim Minister comes—a week from tomorrow!—she will lead you with both knowledge and wisdom.

I feel a little like John the Baptist in this regard: *not* the one Whom God is sending, but rather her herald! When I was a “supply” preacher, I saw it as my task to preach well—but not *too* well! My job was to “fill in” in such a way that you’d be glad I was here for the moment—but also glad that your regular pastor had returned! HA!

Well, this time we have had together is something like that. I am glad to have been with you, and I am assured that you have been glad to have me. But I am only the “appetizer”! The “entrée” is still to come!

Along those lines, I hope you have felt, as I have, that your confidence about our future life together as church is growing! I hope you feel as I do, that when the Real Interim comes, we will be firm in our resolve to meet the challenges that will arise as we endeavor to discover what it means to “BE church” in the 21st Century. This growth in our confidence is surely the work of the Holy Spirit among us... Surely God is working God’s Purpose out. Surely we are being led...

It is especially important that we be alert today to the ways that God is at work among us, because, if today’s lesson is about anything, it is about how different our *human expectations* can be, from what *God* is actually all about. On this Sunday, in particular, ours is both “celebration” AND *confession*. We celebrate Palm Sunday! AND, we confess that our celebration is, in a real way, misguided—meaning: it is more guided by our own wishes and desires, and less guided by a clear sense of where God is leading us and what God wants from us.

Let me say at the outset: Holy Week requires of us a little different mindset than we usually take toward worship. In our usual life together as church, we come on Sunday, and

praise God, and have an experience that renews our sense of our being a *community* of faith—and maybe we even hear a lesson that inspires us, or teaches us: something we can take away, back into our everyday lives. Something to think about. Something to feel through. Something that will influence our behavior for the better.

But during Holy Week, our spiritual process asks something different of us. During Holy Week, our spiritual process asks that we *participate* in Jesus' Passion. **During Holy Week, our spiritual process invites us to make the Passion Narrative our narrative.** The story *about* Jesus back then is to become the story of Jesus in OUR lives today. Religious history becomes our own, personal *spiritual* story. Thus: NOT “out there,” ancient, distant, and far away, but “in here,” contemporary, personal and close. As we re-live the events of Jesus' life, we *live into* those events happening in our own lives.

In my earlier sermons, in February, I spoke about Paul's holding up a “mirror” for us, so that we can see ourselves clearly in our life together as church. Well, here, in Holy Week, a mirror is held up for us—but we are to be like ALICE! We are to go “through the looking glass,” into the world of the Passion Narrative, and recognize ourselves participating in that world! (So thank you, Tim Burton, for your timely recollection of Lewis Carroll's classic!)

Now, I'm not saying that the Scriptures are anywhere near as phantasmagorical as *Alice in Wonderland!* But I AM saying that there is something spiritually instructive, spiritually formative and in-formative for us in re-living the Passion of Jesus annually as we do. For these are the stories of how the Jesus of History became the Christ of Faith—indeed, the Christ of our faith. What occurs in the course of this week is what is TO occur within us, if Christ is to be perpetually alive in us, if our faith is to be an always *living* faith.

So, a little lesson in Bible history—it has to be a “little” because I know very little! HA!

All of the Gospels consist of two main parts, held together by the particular point of view of each Evangelist. The two parts are: 1) the “sayings” of Jesus—the parables and “logion” that the Evangelist collected from the various oral and written traditions circulating in the earliest church, after Jesus' death. (The “Gospel of Thomas” is perhaps the best known example of this.) And: 2) The Passion Narrative—the Story that begins with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and ends with his Resurrection and his appearances thereafter.

Most of the time in our life together as church, we pay attention to the first. This week, we'll pay attention to the latter. And today, we'll look at how Luke begins his version of the Passion Narrative.

OK! So Luke holds up the "looking glass!" And together, we jump through!

And what do we see?

Well, of course we see many of the same things we always see. We see Jesus, arriving just outside of Jerusalem. We see him send a couple of his disciples to fetch the "colt," which they do following the instructions they've been given. We see Jesus riding on the colt, sitting on the disciples' cloaks, while others spread their cloaks on the ground. We hear a cheer go up from the disciples, and we hear God being praised—and we hear some Pharisees calling to Jesus, objecting to what is being said. And we hear Jesus tell the Pharisees it would do no good, that even the stones would cry out if the disciples were quiet.

Ok... So what do we NOT see? Well, the first thing we don't see is very obvious, but we may miss it, so accustomed are we to seeing it... That's right: we see NO palms! In Luke, there are no palms...

What is more, we see no crowds, really, and certainly no children... Not here in Luke. What may be a more public event in the other gospels, here in Luke is more or less private. Whatever it is that is going on here in Luke, it is an entry into Jerusalem just for Jesus, being celebrated by his disciples. With no palms... Already, Luke is helping us get over our expectations...

Now we need to "widen the aperture;" we need to look at Jesus. For a guy in whose honor this "parade" is being given, Jesus is surprisingly grim, even sorrowful. Luke directs our attention away from the hub-bub, and like a consummate movie director, pulls in for a close-up on Jesus' face. And what do we see? Tears. Jesus is crying. And they are not tears of joy. Jesus is weeping... He says:

"If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now, they are hidden from your eyes..."

Then Jesus waxes into sad prophecy, telling what will come...

Luke does not tell us whether Jesus was still crying when he actually entered the city. But he does tell us that happened next: Jesus goes directly to the Temple, and “begins to drive out those who were selling there.”

Now after the exclamatory joy of the disciples and the heart-rending sorrow of Jesus on the way into Jerusalem, if this story were not so familiar to us, we might be a bit taken aback by the anger and determination of Jesus here. But actually, in his telling of the Passion Story, Luke has framed his opening with the anger of Jesus.

If we look back to Luke 19:11-27, we'll see that Luke has included here one of the longest parables of Jesus—and one that concludes most harshly! Luke has Jesus tell this parable for a specific reason: “because he was near Jerusalem, and because [people] supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.” (v11) Elsewhere we would recognize this to be the Parable of the Talents, but here the parable takes on an allegorical lesson: “But as for these enemies of mine,” Jesus has the “nobleman” conclude, “who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence!” (v27)

Far from Gentle Savior, Meek and Mild, this is more about the Red Queen, isn't it?
OFF WITH THEIR HEADS!

This image of Jesus might surprise us, since Luke clearly has Jesus alluding to himself as he turns the parable into an allegory.

But even if we distance ourselves from this image of Jesus, we are helped to understand that Luke tells of Jesus' Passion to make a particular point! Which was: *Jesus was passionate!*

I know... It sounds so funny to say, but Jesus was a *passionate* man! Jesus was not like Buddha: dispassionate, calm and removed. As I invited *us* to do, back on 2/14: *He felt EVERYTHING!* He cared deeply for people. He cared deeply for the religious AND the political conditions of the world at the time. And so, he “wept” over Jerusalem. And he attacked, if I can put it this way, the “business end” of the religious establishment.

So that the moods, the emotional colors of this 19th Chapter of Luke, are quite vibrant! There is grim determination. There is deep sorrow. And there is frustration and anger. All in Jesus... All in Jesus...

Meanwhile, there are his disciples, praising God for the “deeds of power” they had witnessed! THEY are celebrating! And WE would celebrate with them—although, as we know from how the Story plays out, we realize that even here, in their praise of God, they are fairly clueless.

Ah, so what are we to do with what we see? AND with what we do NOT see?(!) In other words, how do we celebrate Palm Sunday *without* palms?

Well, I think it matters how we feel about letting Jesus into our hearts...

The Jesus of Luke is an especially *human* Jesus. He isn't the radical rabbi of Matthew, nor the miracle worker of Mark, nor the eloquent rhetorician of John. There is an unrefined and almost raw quality to the Jesus of Luke—and consequently, some of us may not like him!

Really, what kind of Savior are we looking for? What qualities do each of us want to see in a Savior?

Every year, when we come to this Sunday, and we begin to live into the Story of the Passion of Jesus, we are confronted essentially with this dilemma: What kind of Savior are we looking for? And: will we only get the Savior that we already have made up our minds to see? EVEN if the Savior we want to see is NOT the Savior we really need?

This is the very personal significance of the Passion Narrative, isn't it? It begins with Jesus surrounded by many, and as Luke says, “all of the people were *spellbound* by what they heard.” (v 48) And it ends with the few and the faithful, the persistent who are staving off disillusionment.

We know the arc of the Story. We have some sense of how it turns out.

But still, we do well to ask ourselves: what sort of Savior are we looking for? Because we are likely to SEE only the one we are already looking for...

And we are grateful to Luke, because he reminds us how easily we are swayed by the crowds. Luke reminds us how easily our “vision” of what to look for is shaped, not by our own spiritual needs, but by popular opinion. By advertisement. By the media. By the crowd...

This is a very human thing, and it was no less true in Jesus’ day than it is in ours. But I would say: when it comes to our own spiritual lives, we do ourselves no favors if we are not discerning. We serve neither God nor ourselves well, spiritually, if we simply go along with the consensus choice.

So the Story of the Passion of Jesus begins with a parade—and who does not love a parade? And whether it is, in our minds, more Rose Parade or more “Doo Dah,” it still calls to us to get on board, to ride with the popular choice, to choose the most comfortable and comforting Savior for ourselves.

Yet the man at the center of it all is disturbed. He is not happy. He is not smiling, waving at the crowds. He is being misunderstood—and he’s angry and frustrated by that. He is seeing religion sell its spiritual soul, as devotional practices are being marketed and business interests and concerns come to take over religious life. He has seen what happens when spiritual process is subjugated to the pragmatism of the marketplace—and he does NOT like it.

And most of all, he is grieving: He is grieving for us, for the human condition, for the choices we make—indeed for our blindness, and our refusals to be aware of “the time of [our] visitation by God.” (v.44)

So where are we today, in our search for a Savior? Are we looking for a man of power? Are we looking to be swept up in the buoyant emotion of the present? Are we seeking a “feel good” spirituality that may be shallow but matches our desire to be happy?

Or are we looking for a Savior through Whose eyes we can see ourselves and our world as *God* sees us? Are we looking for a Savior who is NOT pleased about the many ways we “settle,” who is frustrated by our continual “going along” with social and cultural “norms,” and who is truly grieved at what we are missing in our spiritual lives?

The miracle of this day is that, for the moment anyway, we can actually receive the Savior that we most want to see. We are the “Jerusalem” into which Jesus comes. Our “gates” are open! Our defenses are breached. Whether we are ready or not, in comes Jesus!

Now, as we live through the rest of the Passion Narrative, we will see whether we have truly received the Savior that we need—the One God has sent.