

Journey's End

We have traveled quite a distance this morning. Because only a few of us will gather in Fellowship Hall for our Maundy Thursday Communion and Tenebrae Service and perhaps even fewer of us will have the opportunity to seek out a Good Friday service, I thought it would be important this morning to hear the story of Christ's passion through to its ending. It's a long story and we don't hear it all together very often but I think that when we do it shows up some themes that we might otherwise miss. And so we have traveled with Jesus from the exciting, politically charged celebration of his entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, through his conversation with his disciples on the night of the Passover feast, his agony in the garden of Gethsemane, his arrest, trials, torture, execution as a political prisoner and his burial. We've traveled from Sunday to Saturday, from exaltation to utter defeat. I hope that we will find that we have also progressed on our own Lenten journey, examining our hearts for traces of the same forces that destroyed Jesus as well as for Jesus' free and unfettered forgiveness of us and for the foundations of the ongoing change in our own lives which brings us closer to God.

As we hear the story of that remarkable and devastating week, we are confronted by what we might describe as two conflicting world-views. One is a philosophy that is interested in the accumulation and wielding of power. The other is keyed to the renunciation of power and to humility. From the perspective of the first world-view, the story we have heard today is the story of a man who could have been king – he was wildly popular, he was acclaimed and celebrated at a volatile time and place when he could have seized power, the people were ready to crown him. Instead, he slipped away into the shadows, hid out with his friends and abased himself before them, and was seized and executed with other failed revolutionaries. To those interested in holding and using power, this Jesus was a joke, such a good joke, in fact, that the enjoyment of his ridiculous end brought together two old adversaries. Those whose lives are guided by power politics at any level will often come together to take advantage of a weaker, common target. The adherents of such a philosophy may see God as the ultimate player of the power game, a God who rewards the rich and disdains the poor, who sides with the victors against the losers.

This, of course, is not the view of God espoused by Jesus, our exemplar for the world-view of humility and renunciation. The great American Baptist preacher and theologian Walter Rauschenbusch wrote in his 1917 book, A Theology of the Social Gospel, of how Jesus stood against that imperial conception of God. "When (Jesus) took God by the hand and called him 'our Father,' he democratized the conception of God. He disconnected the idea from the coercive and predatory State, and transferred it to the realm of family life, the chief social embodiment of solidarity and love. He not only saved humanity; he saved God." I would add that Jesus not only opened our understanding of our Loving God by calling Him Father but also by proclaiming himself as servant and by offering, even as he neared death, forgiveness that was dependent only on the great grace of God. It was that grace, that love and forgiveness, that spiritual healing and reconciliation that Jesus came to offer as the Good News and he stayed true to his mission to the very end.

There are three moments in our story that shine for me with the light of God's love and forgiveness for us all through Jesus and one in particular that has haunted me over the past few years. The first is from the story of Thursday night, the night of the Passover meal which we now call the Last Supper and commemorate monthly in our Communion. Jesus told his disciples about the new covenant, sealed in his blood, and revealed that one of them would betray him to

that death. In very short order, the disciples go from arguing among themselves about who is the betrayer, the worst, to who is the best and most important. Jesus short-circuits their wrangling: “But he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.”” Power politics is not the order of the day under the new covenant. Those who follow the way of Jesus are not to fall into the age-old trap of licking the hand that beats them when it allows a few favors. It is those who serve who are truly worthy of honor, not those whose credo is “looking out for number one.”

Even more powerful are Jesus' words found in Luke 23:34. Now he is not speaking to his friends, not gently correcting those slow students who still haven't got it. These words are spoken on behalf of those wielding the most brutal power and force against him – the soldiers who have mocked him, beaten him, stripped him and are nailing him to the cross to die. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” He does not call for God to send a squadron of angels to free him and to strike with holy vengeance upon those who hurt him. He does not demand a formal and written apology from the soldiers, their commanders, Herod, Pilate and the Senate and People of Rome. He doesn't even ask them to admit wrongdoing. He knows they don't think they've done anything wrong. He just offers, in humility and love, a prayer to his Father, who Jesus knows loves all His children. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

This same loving, forgiving, humble spirit is behind the story that fascinates me most. It is the story of the two thieves, crucified along with Jesus. Jesus' promise to the so-called “Good Thief,” “Today you will be with me in paradise,” rings strangely in my ears these days. With politicians and popular media so often referencing the dreadful events of September 11, 2001, we are reminded that extremist Islamicists have exhorted their followers, in a dreadful parody of the prophet Muhammad's call, to sacrifice themselves in the jihad against the infidel in order to gain admittance to paradise. With those calls of hatred echoing across the seas from the same region, even the same city where the events we remember today took place, it can be very hard for us to connect the Middle Eastern idea of paradise with Jesus, the one we celebrate as Prince of Peace.

Indeed, our sense of cognitive dissonance may increase when we remember fully to whom Jesus made this promise. Luke, in whose gospel this story appears, calls the two men crucified with Jesus “criminals,” *κακούργος* in Greek, literally “evil-doers.” But Matthew and Mark, who also mention these two unfortunates, are more specific. They call them *αρχιλεστυς*, bandits, or in 21st century terminology, terrorists. These men had been condemned by the Romans, not for slipping away with a basket of fruit that didn't belong to them, but for making a violent assault on Roman interests. And now Jesus is promising one of them paradise. How can this be?

Unlike Matthew, who says both of the bandits reviled Jesus, Luke gives us the story of the good thief, the repentant robber. Luke records that one of the criminals did, indeed, rail at Jesus. “If you are the Christ, save yourself and us.” For this man, his dying is an angry continuing of his living. If Jesus were to grant his request, he would no doubt spring down off his cross onto the nearest Roman soldier, doing as much damage as he could before effecting his getaway. For this

terrorist, known in some legends as Gestas, the violence done to him on this day could only beget more violence, in the same unending, ever-escalating cycle that grips the Holy Land, the Middle East, and indeed the whole world to this day.

Gestas should seem familiar to us, for we live in a country that has no shortage of what Psalm 86 calls “the proud... the assembly of violent men.” For too many Americans, the answer to problems, international and domestic, is to turn to force. Too many voices call for the building of walls to keep the poor out of our country or our neighborhoods rather than for the care of the poor and the alien called for in both Old and New Testament. Too many voices call for the demons of addiction to be exorcized by mandatory sentencing and penal correction rather than with treatment and jobs and measures to address the sense of hopelessness among the urban and rural poor. Too many voices call for the use of our superior firepower against the countries and people who reject the warped view of America we supply them through our movies and television shows, against those who reject our policies that have manipulated their politics for generations, against those who rise up against us with the arms that our munitions industries sold them. Too many in our country have failed to heed the warning of the prophet Isaiah: “Woe to those who look to the current superpower for help, who rely on fast acting columns, who trust in the multitude of their weapons and in the great strength of their soldiers, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the LORD.” Woe to us, indeed, if are so concerned with our own comfort that like Israel in the time of the prophet Amos, we “oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to our mates, ‘Bring us some drinks!’” Let us instead heed these words of Amos: “let justice run down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Let us look not for the shock and awe of apocalyptic force, but rather for the blessed peace of the Day of the Lord, when “Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid.”

Theologian Walter Wink has called our national addiction to force as the answer to our problems “the myth of redemptive violence.” It's the false belief that the “good guys,” be they the police, the Minutemen, the National Guard, the Marines or NATO, can roar in, wipe out the “bad guys,” and set everything right. In his 1998 book, The Powers that Be, Wink wrote: “The myth of redemptive violence (presumes to) speak for God; it does not listen for God to speak. It invokes the sovereignty of God as its own; it does not entertain the possibility of radical judgment by God. It misappropriates the language, symbols, and scriptures of Christianity. It does not seek God in order to change; it embraces God in order to prevent change... Its metaphor is not the journey but the fortress. Its symbol is not the cross but the crosshairs of a gun. Its offer is not forgiveness but victory. Its good news is not the unconditional love of enemies but their final elimination. It is blasphemous. It is idolatrous. And it is immensely popular.”

In accepting the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1964, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “Violence as a way of achieving... justice is both impractical and immoral. I am not unmindful of the fact that violence often brings about momentary results. Nations have frequently won their independence in battle. But in spite of temporary victories, violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones. Violence is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding: it seeks to annihilate rather than convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community

and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends up defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers.”

Let us pray that, rather than living our lives like Gestas, addicted to institutional violence, we should live like the second thief, whom tradition has named Dismas. Luke tells us that Dismas rebuked Gestas. ““Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."” Dismas may have lived outside the law, acting as violently as Gestas, but unlike Gestas, he recognizes the truth when he confronted with it. In the midst of his pain, Dismas does not lash out and seek to inflict pain himself, as Gestas does. Instead, he owns up to his sins, accepts his punishment and seeks a right relationship with God and man. Dismas recognizes in Jesus the embodiment of the peace he has broken for his entire life. He recognizes in Jesus the true authority to which he can give his allegiance here at the last. Now, instead of serving the forces of chaos, he serves the Word become Flesh. “We are punished justly,” he says to his former colleague, “we are reaping as we have sown. But even through my pain, even in his broken body, I see that this man has the real answer. I will honor him, even if you will not.” Dismas, the good thief, embraces God in order to change, even with his last breaths.

Do we have the faith of Dismas to turn from the way of violence to the way of peace, even when we have been brought to extremis by men of violence? Do we have the faith to repent of our contributions to death and injustice? Can we, like Dismas, place our lives, however much may be left of them, under the authority of the Prince of Peace? That is what it takes to hear Jesus say to us, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.” That is what it takes to live the love of Jesus in our lives, to make the new covenant in his blood a reality and to help all humankind to experience the Good News. Like Walter Rauschenbusch, we understand that we must focus on helping those in need in order to walk in the way of Jesus. But first, we offer our lives to the one who died to bring us the truth, to the Son who was and is and ever shall be the true image of our Loving Father.