

Friday's Shadows

sermon digest

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Luke 19:28-32, 35-40; 23:1-9

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Today's announcement of Jesus' arrival in the precincts of Jerusalem brings Luke's long travel narrative to an end. In chapter 9, Jesus, Luke says, tells his disciples twice that he is going to die and then he "set his face to go to Jerusalem." For 10 long chapters we follow him, and then, just outside of Jerusalem, he warns the disciples again, the third and last time, of the death that awaits him, before going on "ahead" of them toward Jerusalem.

The story is familiar to us—so familiar that we are in danger of missing its drama as on Palm/Passion Sunday we begin at the heights of celebration and praise only to descend into the depths of bitter disappointment and abandonment as Jesus faces his accusers and finally dies on the cross. Reflecting on the daunting task before the preacher as Lent flows seamlessly into Easter, long time pastor John Buchanan recalls with some amusement acclaimed theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's confession that on Easter and at Christmas, he sought out a "high" church service with great music and little if any preaching. No preacher, Niebuhr insisted, is up to the task on Easter and Christmas

[*Christian Century*, March 20, 2013].

And frankly, I could not agree more. Everything about our faith hangs in the balance during this crucial week. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are at the heart of who we are. It is the touchstone of our identity. We walk through Lent, finally bringing ourselves to stand before the cross, facing honestly the death and evil afoot in our world and threatening all that we hold sacred. Having experienced the depths to which human pain, loss and betrayal can sink, then, and only then, as Ann Weems put it in the reading we just shared, are we ready for the great mystery of Easter. Only as we have faced Friday's shadows can we even begin to fathom the wonder of Easter's dawn.

So step back with me, if you will, to that moment when Jesus and his disciples enter Jerusalem. Such an entry was not an unfamiliar scene. First century Jerusalem had seen a number of kings and conquering generals enter its gates with much pomp and circumstance. But be sure to note, Jesus' entry and Luke's account of Jesus' entry in particular strike a different note. Compared to the extravagant display and gathering throngs depicted in the other Gospels, Luke's entry is considerably less crowded and more subdued. Those who sing Jesus' praise are those who enter the city with Jesus, not the huge outpouring of the masses. Cut branches, palms and hallelujahs, accouterments of royalty, are not a part of the scene Luke describes. Nor does he make reference to David or David's throne. Instead we have, yes, a young donkey reminiscent of Zechariah's vision of a king who comes in humility, identifying with and freeing those who are suffering, those who are captive, those who are poor (9:9). Almost as if Luke is reaching back to his earlier birth story and the song of the heavenly host, the "king" Luke celebrates is the king of peace: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

At the end of the week, Jesus is taken to the high priest's house where he is held in custody overnight and given a brief hearing the next morning. Interestingly enough, the passage, like Jesus' responses to the questions posed to him, is abbreviated. Six verses describe the questioning concerning his messianic pretensions. Nine verses describe Simon Peter's own trial and denial of Jesus in the courtyard. Appearing then before Pilate and Herod, Jesus is again a man of few words. "Are you," Pilate asks him, "the king of the Jews?" Jesus answers simply, "You say so."

In keeping with the other Gospels, Luke depicts the Jewish leaders, not the Romans, as primarily responsible for Jesus' death. Although the little bit we know of Pilate reveals him to be a petty little, vindictive man, as time intervenes between the writing of the four Gospels, he is increasingly depicted as a deeply reflective ruler, intent on doing justice. Three times Pilate questions Jesus and returns to the mob to plead Jesus' case; and three times he is confronted with cries for Jesus' death. The blame heaped upon the Jewish people, most glaringly in Matthew and John, is muted in Luke, who goes to great lengths to show Jesus and his church to be deeply rooted in the rich soil of the Jewish faith. Tragically, for centuries to come Good Friday services would break forth into terrible carnage as "Christians" raged out of their cathedrals to wreak revenge upon the so-called "Christ killers"—their Jewish neighbors. Could anything be more antithetical to the one who came among us in the name of peace than the terrible legacy of antisemitism that plagues our history?

And so there you have it. Palm Sunday which emerges in the bright rays of hope degenerates into excruciating pain and anger of crucifixion. To be honest, Palm Passion Sunday holds a mirror up to life as we know it. The dissonance between the point at which our service opens and the depths of pain and death to which it moves reflects the unresolved tensions of which life consists. Honesty as we gather here compels us to acknowledge that there is an unfinished, unsatisfied, even tragic quality in our lives, for injustice, pain and conflict do not end today and did not end on Easter Sunday morning two thousand years ago. They are with us still. And how we meet those tensions, how we determine to address them, is critical to the shape our own Christian discipleship will take. Our walk toward Easter and the celebration of Easter do not put the tensions, the incompleteness of life as we know it to rest. Rather, they bring it into full view and we are left to wrestle with them.

Yesterday morning I read the blog of a young woman anticipating the near death of her mother. "The plain truth," she shared, is that

we are losing Mother. Piece by piece, bit by bit. . . . It seems cruel that one good woman should be made to endure so much. So much pain, so much loss of independence, so much indignity, such need for help to do pretty much anything. For my independent, intelligent and highly spiritual mother, this last leg has been a mean moan, a long quiet mean moan echoing into a vast unknowing."

And yesterday afternoon as I was preparing for today's message, I overheard the familiar strains of "Holy, Holy, Holy" coming from Larry's computer downstairs and remembered word from his friend M.J. that the memorial service for his wife Carol would be streamed live from Kansas City. I went down and joined Larry in an incredibly sorrowful time for one who had lived well but died much too early. What I heard were words of the faith that had kept M.J. and Carol throughout their life together and during those difficult days as it became apparent she would lose her battle with cancer. The reality and sorrow of the Lenten season was played out before our eyes, but so was the strengthening presence of the God who would not let them go. We were deeply moved by the strong chords that resounded with faith and listened intently to the deeply stirring words of one of the several anthems:

My God, I love thee.

Not because I hope for Heaven thereby,

nor yet because who love thee not must die eternally.

Thou, oh My Jesus, Thou didst me upon the cross embrace.

Nails and spear and manifold disgrace.

Why, then, why, Oh blessed Jesus Christ, should I not love thee well?

Not for the hope of gaining aught, not seeking a reward.

But as thyself hast loved me, oh Everloving Lord.

E'en so I love thee, and will love, and in Thy praise will sing,

solely because Thou art my God and my Eternal King.

John Buchanan shares the story of his wife, sitting during Lent at the bedside of her father on the final night of his life. She later shared with her husband that she had begun the evening recalling memories from the past; but as she ran out of words, she began singing Easter songs and saying to him, "Easter's coming, Daddy; Easter's coming."

The minister stepping into the pulpit on Easter Sunday morning, Buchanan goes on to tell us, is not tasked with the mission of "explanation," but "proclamation." Rather than explaining the mystery, ours is the task of holding out "an invitation to 'walk through the door' into a new world where the ultimate reality is not the death of all things: the ultimate reality is God and love everlasting." We gather here this Sunday morning and we will come again next Sunday morning not because it all makes sense and we have all the answers. We gather here because in spite of all that still tears at our hearts and souls, we walk forward still in the hope and promise we have encountered in the one we call the Christ. Thanks be to God!