

Marquand Chapel
April 7, 2006: B-Daily Lectionary for Friday before Palm and Passion Sunday

Reality Check

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Introduction

Let me begin by thanking the chapel ministers for this opportunity to be with you in worship today. Unbeknownst to them, this *Friday before the beginning of Holy Week* is an important anniversary in my personal journey. Twenty-seven years ago, this very day, I received my letter of admission to Yale Divinity School. The year was 1979; Jimmy Carter was our President – and my then four year old son – now thirty-one – remembers that morning as the first time he understood how grown-ups sometimes cry when they are, in fact, “very happy.”

I would also ask that we hold in prayerful thanksgiving the memory of two pastors;
Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King whose sacrificial deaths we observe this week;
April 9, 1945 in Flossenberg Prison in the last weeks of the Third Reich;
April 4, 1968 the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, Memphis, Tennessee

Surely eternal light continues to shine through their witness, as they now see Jesus face to face and share in the glory of God.

Will you pray with me: *Holy God may the words which I speak be honest, brave, and acceptable to you – we pray as well that your Holy Spirit may warm the hearts of all those gathered here. In the good and strong name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.*

Sermon

Oh my. I have been allotted nine minutes to preach and the clock is already ticking! So I will leave the detailed exegesis of these passages to your further study, and as they say, “cut to the chase.” What I hear in these texts is a haunting description of the cost of discipleship.

Both Paul and Mark would have us know that to follow Jesus is to set out on a perilous journey. Yet both Paul and Mark want us to know, in our bones, that Grace abounds and Way will open, if not now, then on the other side of death – for those who put their trust in God. That’s the deal. The real deal – the central paradox of Christian experience.

Therefore, the placement of these readings by the daily lectionary on the eve of Palm and Passion Sunday is no accident. They are here to direct our attention toward what is to come.

What more can we say about these things? Why do we tell this story year after year, turning our faces toward the ancient tragedy about to unfold? Why dwell on pain, suffering, and defeat? Can’t we just skip to the next chapter this year?

Well, the answer is, of course “no.” The ancient wisdom of our faith says that an authentic spirituality, an authentic social ethic, an authentic telling of God’s history with humankind compels the church to go very slowly through Passiontide. . . .to notice how easily power is misused, to identify with One who cries out for justice and mercy and faith, to face the darkness into which the Light has come. Holy Week functions as a kind of Christian reality-check. Despite whatever the current spin may be, the cross does not lie about the human condition. The cross does not lie.

In an article in “Journal for Preachers” a contemporary theologian, Douglas John Hall, paraphrases Martin Luther’s declaration of the power of the cross to unmask the powers that be. In the 21st Thesis of the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther contended that *“the theology of glory, that is, religious and political triumphalism, has to lie about life, calling good evil and evil good; instead, the theology of the cross calls a thing what it actually is. It says: Look! There is a great deal that is simply wrong with this world! Innocent people suffer, and many guilty ones prosper. Look at all that injustice, look at war, look at the degradation of nature. Look at all the costly death. . .no, do not turn away from it! ‘Religion’ may tempt you to shut your eyes and just give thanks for your blessings. But faith wants you to open your eyes. Until you do that you will never be in a position to understand the pain of God, or God’s way of healing your pain as well.”*

Oh my. Tough talk from Luther in a time when many American Christians cannot bring themselves to see what is being done in our name – and in the name of Jesus. Nevertheless, Holy Week is a reality-check for those who would be faithful to the Gospel. These events, from the cleansing of the temple to the crucifixion, provide the measure, the model, and the true reflection of the human condition before God. The whole range of human failure is exposed. No one is left out. Even before Jesus arrives at the gates of Jerusalem, the Zebedee brothers petition Jesus to promote them above their fellows; and the other ten disciples rail in anger at this perceived injustice! Surely they will get the best seats in paradise!

Fear, pride, greed, delusions of grandeur, disloyalty, betrayal of friendship, cruelty for its own sake, nationalism, the perceived need to maintain order and security at any cost—all these themes will intertwine to form the net of death that captures the suffering servant of God and hands him over to shame, defeat, and execution.

Friends, this is the One who has called us here to follow him.

When I was much younger, I questioned the annual observance of Lent and the Passion of Jesus. In my twenty-something self-righteousness, it seemed to me that this story, re-told again and again, bred pathology and served to take our attention away from the present moment with its joys and needs. I thought it was a morbid exercise to follow Jesus to the cross – and a dangerous one which had been used so often in our history to induce guilt or to inflame Anti-Semitism. My younger self thought it better to focus on the outcome - on the fact of Resurrection – “Didn’t Jesus rise from the dead after all?” “The cross is empty” “Grace abounds.” “Share this Good News.”

Well, yes. Perhaps. Often.

But to my youthful self I must now say that those impulses to “accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative” were, at best, premature and certainly not strong enough to anchor my faith when in a ‘perfect storm.’ So I slowly came to understand that Holy Week observances – Palm and Passion Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, the spiral downward into darkness, are all a necessary part of our formation as mature Christians.

How else would we come to know that God is present in our human pain?

Unless we knew the story of the cross. . .

[Not Mel Gibson's nightmare or the re-cut version suitable for all ages .]

How else would we come to distinguish between a false, civic faith and the real thing?

Unless we had been formed by the story of Jesus' collision course with the Roman and Jewish governments?

How else would we grow to understand the vast mystery that is God's relationship to creation?

Unless we were led to enter that mystery every year in an honest way?

Jesus was not crucified because he was kind to cripples and blind people. Jesus was not betrayed because he valued children. Jesus was not turned over to the authorities because he preached a sentimental message illustrated with interesting stories. Rather, he was 'done to death' because he challenged the ways of his (and our) world. He sought to reform the corrupt religious state of his day. He proclaimed a Gospel which, in every time and place, is subversive of military, hereditary, and economic power.

As God's Beloved he said "Follow me."

The greatest among you should be servant of all; love your neighbor as you love yourself; what is more, seek peace with your enemy. Put relationships with others first. Do no harm. Understand that you can possess nothing for ever. Do not render to the empire that which belongs to God: your allegiance, your integrity, your life. Only God's Kingdom is worth it.

Jesus was found guilty of causing public disorder, subverting the state, and blasphemy against God. He died a wretched death, seemingly alone and abandoned. Let's stay a while with these things as the time approaches.

What is it that God would have us learn now?

That being a disciple never allows us to negotiate a permanent peace with the ways of the world and its institutions.

There will always be something to give up, to give away, to lose.

Just as there will always be suffering in the midst of the most pious and joyful life. And it is our task, as ministers of the Gospel, to tell folks the truth about sin and defeat and random cruelty – just as it is our call to proclaim the wildness of the Resurrection.

Nevertheless, Paul reminds us "since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart."

Like the privileged, religious man who knelt before Jesus, we may be shocked at the cost of discipleship and even go away grieving. Nevertheless I like to imagine that this fearful person turned up again to listen on Pentecost and was clothed in the power of the Holy Spirit. "For with God, all things are possible."

May it be so with us. Amen.

1. This sermon is indebted to ideas found in "Preaching the Cross in Our Context" by Douglas John Hall, "Journal for Preachers" Easter 2005.