

Palm Sunday
March 24, 2013
Jill R. Russell

Texts:
Isaiah 50.4-9a
Psalm 118.1-2, 19-29
Philippians 2.5-11
Luke 19.28-40

Earlier this week I stumbled upon the list of thank you cards I never sent out this year after Christmas. I'm banking on the fact that it is never out of season to say thank you. Those cards are going to go out and before the 4th of July; although maybe not on the Christmas stationary. That *would* seem out of season this time of year.

I was thinking about the way we so carefully observe seasons in the life of the church. Isn't it strange that we segment the story of God's life with us so strictly? We would never dream of singing our opening hymn from last week "What Wondrous Love Is This" during Advent any more than we would sing "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" during Lent.

Not so for the writer of Luke. As he brings us to this day we call Palm Sunday he very intentionally draws us back to the story of Christmas. When Jesus first entered into human life, Luke tells us that "suddenly with the angel there was a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors."¹ As Jesus descends from the Mount of Olives Luke tells us that "the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully."² They echo back what the angels sang: "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven."³

I read this week that the city of Jerusalem was considered by the Israelites to be the place where heaven and earth meet and this commentator was imagining that the intent of Luke was something like our practice of passing the peace only on a cosmic scale⁴. From the very beginning, not only of Jesus' life, but from the beginning of time God has come among us to declare the peace and the glory of heaven; to bring that peace and glory into our experience on earth. And we are invited to echo that peace and glory back again.

¹ Luke 2.13-14, NRSV

² Luke 19.37, NRSV

³ Luke 19.38b, NRSV

⁴ William G. Carter, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 152.

It feels right to celebrate this day with a festive spirit; to bring back to our sight and memory the joy of God-with-us. It feels right to let the children lead us with their exuberance as we sing together “Hosanna - blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” As you well know passing the peace in the midst of our worship does not magically make peace on earth. But it does stand as a sign post for us of what we long for and what we work toward. And sometimes when two people who are embroiled in conflict reach for each other’s hands in worship and speak the words “Peace be with you” and “And also with you” for a moment we get a little foretaste of what is possible in God’s realm.

The joy that Luke brings to this day is fueled by his conviction that the deeds of power the disciples were seeing were a mere foretaste of what was yet to come. And, yes, perhaps some in that crowd expected the power of God to be set against the power of Rome. Their joy was driven by their desire for the peace of Israel to come through triumph over their enemies. They got swept up in the spirit of the day and missed the paradox Jesus intended by this procession. He meant for them and for us to see that the glory of heaven is not found in military strength. Unlike the armed troops of Rome descending upon the city to “keep the peace” during the time of the Passover, the power of God is not coercive and the peace of God does not come at the price of violence or brute strength. As the crowds that day echoed peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven they did not understand what that peace or what that glory might require from them. And it was precisely that misunderstanding that moved Jesus in the next verse to weep over Jerusalem saying “If you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!⁵” What a strange place for Jesus to be: surrounded by the praise of God’s people and the promise of God’s glory but knowing too the suffering that is to come for him and the uncertainty that will plague his disciples.

I felt that strange mix of triumph and grief as I read the newsletter for Western Theological Seminary this week. I heard about what happened at the seminary -what is described in this first article - because Jim Brownson showed for Early Worship a few weeks ago bald. One of his fellow professors at Western has been undergoing chemotherapy to treat a particularly nasty form of blood cancer. When he was about to undergo the most powerful chemo and was going to lose his hair 16 members of the community (faculty, administration and students) shaved their heads in solidarity with him and to raise funds for research. I cried my way through most of this article. The image of these colleagues with bald heads gathered around the TV image of this professor who skyped from his hospital bed spoke to the solidarity of their love and commitment to pray for his healing. And then there was the testimony of this professor. When he first announced his diagnosis, he reminded the community of the truth of the gospel from the Heidelberg catechism - “That I am not my own, but belong

⁵ Luke 19.42, NRSV

- body and soul, in life and in death - to my faithful savior Jesus Christ⁶." I was overcome as I read the article by the strength of conviction in this professor and in this community and I was taken by the power of God's Spirit that lives within God's people. There was a sense of triumph in what I was reading mixed with a deep sense of grief and uncertainty.

That is why it is so important for us to re-enact and re-live this holy week of our Lord each year. What he faced as took the triumph of that procession with him into the uncertainty and suffering of the week ahead he did for us. This is the world in which we live. We seek to embody the glory and the peace of heaven - to echo back to God what God has given to us. But even in those moments of triumph when we get a glimpse of that glory, it is so often mingled with grief or followed closely behind by grief because this world we live in is so broken. Sin and suffering lives inside of us and swirls around us and even when we ultimately trust in the promise of God we still cannot know with certainty what the future will hold.

The book of Philippians calls us to take on the mind of Christ which according to one writer means that we are to take on the stance, and attitude and disposition of Christ.⁷ As I watch Jesus as Luke reveals him to us today I see someone who is willing to stand in his conviction knowing that it will lead him into vastly uncertain terrain. That is a place we find ourselves time and time again. All we can know as we walk through whatever triumph or suffering comes our way is that we do not walk alone. *And* that the One who walks with us has gone this way before and knows precisely what the peace of heaven costs and what the glory of heaven can bring.

I received a gift this week that reminded me of this truth. It was a poem that Rachelle Oppenhuizen sent to me that was written by Hope Church member, Laurie Baron. She gave me permission to share it with you today.

There is no sign, no wisdom for this dark
where footsteps fall uncertain into certain pain,
no neat instructions for the making of this work
of going down to death, to test again

what lies beyond the dust of human fear--
if there is any presence there to hold
where knowledge fails, and power only hears
itself and leaves its audiences cold

⁶ Quote comes from Q&A 1 from the Heidelberg Catechism.

⁷ Douglas F. Ottati, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 172.

and still alone to face the coming night.
Out of the ash a voice comes close as breath:
Beloved, you and I will find delight
together in this place that reeks of death.

Because my body's sign hangs on the tree
your passage into life is held in me.⁸

Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!

⁸ Poem by Laurie Zwemer Baron -2006, rev. 2010. The poem was originally written as a reflection on 1 Cor. 1:22-23: "Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified."