

Date: April 4, 2004

SUNDAY: Palm Sunday

SERMON: The Tragedy of Hindsight

Text(s): Isaiah 50: 4-9; Luke 19: 28-44

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“If only. . .” Two of the most commonly used and sometimes two of the saddest words in our language. “If only I had known I was going to be living in France some day, I’d have taken French instead of Spanish in school.” “If only I had known the market was going into the tank before I bought those stocks.” “If only I had known he had an uncontrollable temper, I probably wouldn’t have married him in the first place.” Those two words, which all of us have used more frequently than we’re probably aware, are proof of the old cliché that “hindsight is better than foresight.” We can all see where we’ve been much more clearly than we can see where we are or where we’re going. Judging from the coverage of the congressional hearings into the 9/11 attacks, I think it’s probably safe to say that there are a lot of “if only’s” being expressed in the corridors of Washington these days.

Though we all may regret the missed opportunities or poor judgments that we see clearly only in hindsight, sadder by far, in some ways, are the occasions when we observe someone else, someone we love making mistakes or behaving in destructive ways or missing opportunities because they can’t see what we can see clearly from our position as a detached observer. Few parents live to see their children grow to adulthood without some painful “if only’s” along the way. From our observation point we can see clearly how the other person might have avoided the difficulty, but we’re powerless to prevent or control what happens because we’re powerless to control the other person, whether that person be a child, a spouse, a colleague, a friend, or even, in the case of Jesus and the story in our Gospel lesson, the religious leadership of a whole city.

In the Gospel of Luke, the story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem shortly before his Passion, is a story of “if only.” When we read the Palm

Sunday story in our gospels, it’s hard for us to imagine ourselves in the place of the religious leaders, the ordinary citizens of Jerusalem, and the political authorities. We read the story, written from the perspective of Christian believers, and we wonder how anyone could have failed to recognize who Jesus was. And because Christians have always piled pious imagination on top of the gospel narratives, we now have a picture in our minds of Jesus entering Jerusalem at the head of a great parade. We picture hundreds, if not thousands of people, turned out to welcome him, all of them waving palm branches. That’s why we call it Palm Sunday after all. We imagine food vendors passing through the crowd selling snacks and cold drinks. We imagine people waving, carrying signs or banners. Our imaginations even influence the hymns written or sung. We sang this morning,

“All glory, laud and honor, to you redeemer, king;

To whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring,”

And like virtually every other church in Christendom today, our children opened the service with a procession of palms.

Yet none of our gospels even mention the presence of children. *“From every corner a thousand voices sing, praises to him who comes in the name of God.”* That’s the refrain of a more recent Palm Sunday hymn, yet none of the gospels suggest the presence of thousands of people. Only the account in the Gospel of John is there any mention of palm branches being waved. In our lesson this morning, for instance, St. Luke, says that it was only Jesus’ disciples who hailed his entry into Jerusalem, and says nothing about any waving of branches. Such pious imagination is natural, but it probably also conceals an “if only.” If only we had been in Jerusalem that day, we would have been among those cheering Jesus as he rode into town. We would have recognized who he was.

I suspect that had we been among those citizens of Jerusalem that day, our reaction would have been no different than theirs. We might have gone to the central marketplace early in the

morning to shop for fresh vegetables or draw water from the fountain, and perhaps we'd have heard some rumors going around that the Galilean prophet whose reputation has reached Jerusalem was supposed to be coming to town today. Maybe we'd have been interested, but more likely not. It would have depended, I suppose, on how interested we were in religious prophets. Probably a Britney Spears concert or a sudden dip in the stock market would have drawn our attention more than Jesus would have. I don't imagine that the people of Jerusalem were any more or any less perceptive than any of us are.

The fact of the matter is that none of us is particularly good at grasping the deeper significance of what is going on around us all the time. We're so busy just living through the dailiness of our routines, coping with the hundred small details that we have to deal with every day, juggling our hectic schedules between work and family and church and school and shopping and biking or boating that we don't have time to be reflective, to contemplate what is really going on in front of our eyes or under the surface until, it jumps up and bites us on the bottom.

We might expect that if God is going to grace us with his presence, that presence would be announced by trumpet fanfares, spectacular celestial displays, and at the very least, a choir of the heavenly host singing "Glory to God in the highest." Wasn't it St. Luke, in fact, who told us that the birth of Jesus was attended by just such a choir of angels singing the Gloria? Of course, he also says that the only ones who heard the angels were a few illiterate shepherds out in the fields. I wonder, perhaps, if St. Luke isn't being very deliberate when he has Jesus' disciples in this story of the entry into Jerusalem hailing Jesus with the same line that the choir of angels sang at his birth, "Glory in the highest." Is Luke, perhaps, saying to us that in fact, the presence of God among us is not going to be accompanied by spectacular signs which compel belief, but rather in such quiet, unassuming, even unexpected ways, that if we're not paying very close attention, if we're not really tuned in with eyes of faith to see, we'll miss

it altogether? Could it be that it is not in the great megachurches, not in the halls of the White House, not in the corner offices on Wall Street, where we're likely to find God? Could it be that it is precisely in the birth of a baby in a stable to humble parents attended by illiterate shepherds, or an itinerant teacher riding into town on the back of a donkey with his ragtag group of followers, or even in the brutal and politically expedient execution of an innocent man where God is to be seen?

I believe that is exactly what Luke is telling us by placing the story of Jesus' lament over Jerusalem so that it immediately follows upon his entry into the city. The religious leaders certainly don't know what's going on; all they see and hear are some noisy ruffians from the countryside, disturbing the peace. "*Teacher,*" they say to Jesus, "*tell your disciples to be quiet.*" Jesus just sits there on his donkey, amused at their discomfiture, and says, "*I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.*"

And then Jesus enters the city and looks around him and weeps. "*If only today you had recognized the things that make for peace. But now they are hidden from your eyes. You did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.*"

What sad words! What an indictment of all of us! Because we were too busy to discern God's presence in the midst of the present moment, we cannot recognize or do the things that make for peace. They are hidden from us.

Whether in the arena of geo-politics and international relations or in our broken families, and interpersonal relationships, we missed discerning our visitation from God, the presence of God that could have transformed those destructive dynamics.

But God is gracious. God is waiting to give us the gift of inner attention that will open our eyes to his presence, open our eyes to those things that make for our peace and the peace of the world.

Thomas Clarke, a Jesuit priest tells of a personal experience that he calls "the most signal grace of a decade." In 1978, he attended a

conference in Washington and embarked on his first ride on the newly completed Metro. At Metro center he just missed his connecting train to Dupont Circle and he was thoroughly disgruntled at the prospect of ten precious minutes lost (from what?). He paced the platform, bag in hand, checking his watch and looking up the tracks compulsively for the next train. Finally, when he was feeling thoroughly irritated, and after what seemed like an eternity, it came and soon he found himself standing in the bus shelter at Dupont Circle only to spend more than half an hour waiting for the bus to Georgetown. More pacing, more anxiety, more inner frustration and resentment. Then, he said, that's when the mystical moment began. He noticed a child about five years old playing across the street. The thing that made him notice was that the child was playing so close to the curb that he was afraid that the youngster was about to go out in the street. But then he saw that the little fellow wasn't about to go in the street, and he relaxed. But his attention having been caught, he began to follow the dawdling, carefree movements of the little boy, and to his surprise, he found himself enjoying what he saw. All thought of his late bus disappeared from his mind. All concern about the loss of precious minutes receded, and he became aware of a great inner stillness in which he began to realize what he had been missing both back at Metro Center and in the bus shelter.

Here I was--a baptized Christian, then a religious, then a priest--presumably engaged in the search for God as the agenda of my life, but somehow blind to the presence of God in ordinary or "dull" moments. Jacob's words at Bethel sum up the grace offered to me at Dupont Circle, "Truly the Lord was in this place, and I never knew it."

As he became aware of the moment of God's visitation, a young man standing nearby asked him for the time. Clarke told him, and then, contrary to his New York habit of total introversion while traveling, he began a conversation with the young man, a law student it turned out, who really needed to have a

conversation with someone a little older and more mature at that moment. And because he was now paying attention to the grace of the present moment, Clarke was able to be fully present to that young man. So when his bus finally came, he says, "It was a different me who boarded the bus." Different and yet the same. His experience provided him with a new focus for his own spiritual life. He came to understand what one of his eighteenth century Jesuit brothers, Jean Pierre de Caussade called in one of the great classic writings on the spiritual life, "the sacrament of the present moment." And he concludes his story by saying,

To the eyes of faith, there is no such thing as a dull moment. It is we who become dulled by inattention. When we let the Spirit of Christ sharpen our senses and free us from useless anxieties and superficial excitements about tomorrow, the ten thousand faces of Christ speak to us of God and call us to find our true life in each present moment.

Holy Week is one of the opportunities given to us each year to sharpen our spiritual vision, to hone our faculties of discernment. By taking advantage of the more reflective, even somber mood of this season, we can give ourselves over to paying attention to a birth in the stable behind the inn or to the man on the donkey entering the city. We can walk with Jesus through his sufferings, and by doing so, allow the sufferings of the whole world, including our own sufferings, to take on new meaning in light of his sufferings. Perhaps then, we too will be able to recognize the time of our visitation, so that we can enter into the world's passion redemptively, as agents of the hope of resurrection.