

At the 10:30 am service on March 28, 2010, the Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on Luke 19:28-40 and Luke 23:1-49.

“Palm Passion Vignettes”

Since the passages today are so long and they tell the palm-passion stories I thought I'd share some vignettes that appeared to me when I read the texts.

As mentioned last week, we include the passion today because some people might not be able to attend the Good Friday Service at 7 pm this Friday. The road to Easter must go through the cross of Good Friday for the resurrection to have its fullest meaning.

The first vignette is the opening words of the palm procession: “When he (Jesus) had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this: ‘The Lord needs it.’”

The disciples find everything as Jesus said. The owner of the colt releases the animal to the disciples. How did Jesus know that this would happen as he predicted? There are two explanations.

One, he pre-planned it. Someone went ahead and set it up. That's a fair explanation. The other shows Jesus' power of observation. There's a story in Umberto Ecco's book *The Name of the Rose* where the protagonist a Franciscan friar is walking in thickly covered snowy woods. He's a wise, astute and spiritual man.

During his walk a man runs into the picture and announces that he's looking for his lost horse. The friar saw no horse running this way but states is it this kind of horse, this color, this height, etc. and the man says indeed it is. The friar says: “He's gone that way” and the man dashes off in the pointed direction. While normal mortals will walk in the snowy wood and see nothing this religiously observant man saw slight indentations in the covered snow, a broken twig on a tree, and other subtle signs that pointed to a type of horse which had to be a certain color and height and had to be heading in a certain direction.

I think Jesus had that kind of intuition, power of observation and perceptiveness and he had walked this way before and knew that a colt would be in a certain place with a man who loved his ministry and saw him as the one sent by God. So the disciples found the scenario as mentioned by Jesus.

God calls us to that kind of sensitivity and perceptiveness. It comes more and more as we grow in the spirit.

Vignette two is the conclusion of the procession story: “As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in

the highest heaven!' Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.' He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.'

The Pharisees are worried that the news of crowds shouting of another king, entering Jerusalem, would not sit well with King Herod. They feared an uprising and so it's natural for them to be concerned and try to still the crowd. Then the lovely words by Jesus: "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Remember how someone made a parcel on the selling of pet rocks. I wondered why no-one had picked up on shouting stones. I googled "shouting stones" to see if anyone had marketed them. No shouting stones *per se* were being sold but "shouting stones" are record labels, names of book stores, a title of a book, jewelry for all occasions and attached to media on Facebook, a photostream and a podcast. Someone is selling a "shouting stones" domain name. There's a pet rock.

What do we make of the phrase in this text? There is so much joy about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem that even if one silenced the crowd here it would pick up everywhere again. The stones represent the impossibility to quell the enthusiasm. A similar metaphor is: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." The more we kill the faithful the more they rise up and multiply.

This leads to the passion. Many vignettes jump out of this long passage. I shall note two, my third and fourth vignettes,

The third is the crucifixion scene which is the subject of many paintings: Three crosses on a hill. The afternoon has darkened and we experience an intimate conversation with the three persons on the three crosses, Jesus is in the middle and two criminals are on either side of him. The biblical passage tells the story best.

"One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'"

The one criminal is bitter and mocking to the end and that will follow him into death. The other is repentant and inadvertently communicates the good news. He affirms Jesus power to forgive him and free him in death. He affirms God's realm in Jesus' life and in death. "Remember me when you when you come into your kingdom." Then the amazing response by Jesus who affirms life after death and absolutely assures this man that he will live in death this very day. This is one of the finest sentences (for me) in scripture: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

That same message comes to us. The second we die we will be with Jesus in paradise. And to be with Jesus is to be in the realm of delight (as a hymn states) within an

ambience of love and compassion. Jesus is preparing a place for us as stated in John 14.

The final vignette is the amazing last words by Jesus from the cross. These are his final prayers.

- “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

and

- “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

The first is a prayer of forgiveness and the second a prayer of relinquishment. According to H. Stephen Shoemaker in the book *Feasting on the Word*¹ these are the two most important prayers we can offer when crosses come.

“Whom was Jesus forgiving? The disciples who deserted him, the Roman soldiers who killed him, the Roman and Jewish ruling elite who condemned him to death, yes. Was he forgiving us all forever...? This is the gospel.”

Did they know what they were doing? Only in part. None of us knows the full extent of the ways we separate ourselves from God or the full harm we do. God’s forgiveness covers all.

Shoemaker concludes: In his prayer of relinquishment, Jesus offers to God what he has been offering all along, the faithfulness at the heart of things. This prayer quotes Psalm 31, an evening prayer of “letting go.” He gives his life over to God. He relinquishes control in order to be carried by God. It’s like catching a wave when surfing. One paddles for the wave then one feels the wave carrying you.

Can you imagine two better prayers with which to live and die, especially when life has done its worst to us?

And so we continue on to Easter through the cross. Amen.

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Pres, 2009