

Deception OR Hope? And The Verdict

It is a delight and an honor to be invited here to Stanford Memorial Church with you on Palm Sunday (thank you Rev. Joanne). And I have to say, when it comes to sacred spaces, I never walk in here but that I am not struck with a glorious sense of something beyond, something sublime. The use of natural materials, space, and light are for my bang – stupendous. For those of you who are here today, who may avoid next Sunday, I assume you adhere to the “*Beat the Easter Rush, get a good seat on Palm Sunday Rule.*” Speaking of Palm Sunday, last year I was still living in England, and shared in festivities at Canterbury Cathedral. We gathered in the 15th c Chapter House with sagging stone benches worn from pilgrims’ behinds, and waited for the processional to begin including donkeys, choir, clergy, and people (always entertaining to follow donkeys). We processed around the great monastic cloister as we chanted in unison. We then migrated toward the great Cathedral Doors which opened to a nave filled with young people and children waving palm branches, the pipe organ and orchestra peeling out the opening hymn as we all filed inside this ancient edifice.

It remains a potent image for me, a sense of unbounded joy on that same day two millennia ago as Jesus rode a donkey descending the Mount of Olives with the throngs throwing down their cloaks, as he entered Jerusalem through the city’s Golden Gate, long since sealed shut. And by the way, no that is not where we got the name for an equally famous suspended monument out here on the west coast. Today begins our 2013 pilgrimage into this most holy week of the Christian calendar. And I don’t know about you, but when I think of celebration, joy, palm branches, and even bunnies, I don’t necessarily immediately think of a legal trial. But that is where our story begins today. I am speaking to the lectionary authorities, whoever they may be, those who set the readings each Sunday (if you’re one of them, I apologize in advance). In the future, it would be really nice to use the actual biblical text describing the scene for Palm Sunday on Palm Sunday. It’s like watching an old I love Lucy rerun and Ethel and Lucy’s lips are still moving long after the words have stopped.

So here we are this Sunday dropped into a courtroom - a courtroom where charges are brought against the defendant, an itinerant rabbi. Having been interrogated by the Jerusalem Sanhedrin in the prior chapter, Jesus is brought before the supreme authority of the Roman occupying government, the prefect, Pontius Pilate. A précis of the case includes charges of sedition, based on two counts: 1) attempt to obstruct the payment of taxes to Caesar, and 2) a claim to be an anointed king – political charges first and last. Now picture this, a teacher from a backwater town in a backwater province, traveling amidst other little villages within a 60 mile radius, with a rag-tag band of village idiots with no jobs or education, building an economic plan to overthrow the Roman Imperial Power. This is not only laughable. It is in the purest sense, a trumped up charge and hardly a real threat to the Pax Romana and the Roman Republic.

Taking a break from our trial and jumping back to my earlier pet peeve with those pesky lectionary authorities, it is very rare that we have an entire chapter plus dedicated to a single Sunday, let alone one as packed as Luke 23. If we make good time this morning, by my calculation, I should have you out of here in plenty of time to catch this evening’s History Channel new epic

series, *'The Bible'*. Is that fair? In order to unpack our story, we need to note Luke's trajectory. He speaks of one literary leit motif "The Outsider".

And he begins with a cast of rather undistinguished characters – an unmarried village woman, an ageing couple, a crazy man in the desert, a baby, sheep herders, the lonely figures of Simeon and Anna – not exactly a cast of ratings boosters.

Luke points to a particular type of outsider – one who is without access to the currency of the prevailing market – without voice; to be without words; to be without the means of those who domesticate and order the world; where whatever I say will be discounted below the rate that is required to enter the game. In our story Jesus is asked repeatedly if he is the Messiah. And each time he responds, *"You say that I am."* While much ink has been spilt on the meaning of that one phrase, let's boil it down – *"I have nothing more to say to you that will enable you to understand who I am. Words won't suffice."* In that response, Luke takes Jesus and literally places him with the voiceless. But Luke takes it even one step further. God is seen IN the very riff raff of society. God's transcendence appears precisely in the fact that they are "left overs". Luke begs the question, is it even possible to order our world such that someone's welfare and voice is never to be excluded? Or in the words of Archbishop Rowan Williams, *"We are unavoidably bound to exclusion as we try to give form to our social and moral life ... and does that mean that God is a sort of vast moral dustbin?"* A scratchy pill to swallow.

In truth, Luke is not saying anything about right and wrong per se, that God is with the outsider because that is preferable, politically correct, and morally right (something more apt to be said today). If so, we would be falling into a manner of taming our social structure with no change whatsoever – the template that most movements and rebellions follow, replacing the old with new conventions to express a sense of perfect freedom from the old, replacing old models with new heroes. And inevitably, someone is pushed to the outside once again. Can we help ourselves? Or let us bring it a step closer to our own backyard. What can I make of the unfinished business of my own life – the person I shall never be able to make it up to; the person who has never forgiven me; the person I seem never able to fully forgive; the person who I trusted and who proved a mistake. Are these not the leftovers in my own biography – my own outsiders? Or as Williams has said, *"the ones whose absence and nonreconciliation simply spoil the satisfying outline of my life."*

St. Angus, an 8th c Scottish saint came to Balquidder, a tiny hamlet in a beautiful valley surrounded by forested hills in the Scottish highlands. He knelt in a glen and blessed it where the Balquidder Church stands to this day. He recognized the Celtic expression that Balquidder, nestled in this valley, represented a "thin place", a space where the transcendent and earthly meet. In our story, we approach the crucifixion as the heavens become dark, the veil in the temple is rent. And only in Luke's gospel do we hear the two thieves given voice. In the crucifixion, we enter this "thin place" where the shouts of "CRUCIFY HIM" by the crowds hours before dissolve into a lament, 'this was an innocent man'. In this thin place, the transcendent does not rule with a scepter.....rather from a cross.

Harun al-Rashid, became the fifth Arab Caliph in the late 8th c over what today would be known as modern Iraq. It was by all measure a time of tremendous artistic, scientific, and literary flourishing. His life is the stuff of magnificent tales as told in the The Book of One Thousand and One Nights. In one such tale, the Caliph of Baghdad often would escape his court at night in disguise to mingle with his people. He remained deeply concerned that all were being treated well by his government. He would ask questions and engage conversation, seeking to right what he perceived were any wrongs, or steady their hearts if he observed the need. In the tale of Caliph, it is of the - very - essence - of - majesty - to - lay - majesty - aside. There are places in the human heart

where force cannot go. In the case of Luke, the royal mace was set down. Power was given over. The consistent miracle that all sought in our story today, from Herod the tetrarch to the convicted murderer was that Jesus would save himself. He didn't.

In Luke's crucifixion scene, power is stripped. We peer into a defenseless love. Such powerlessness becomes in itself, painful – looking into poverty, neediness. Our defenses are exposed. And we have one of two choices. We can sidestep our own outsider status and that of the other. Or, we can acknowledge that we stand in need of the same alms as the other. Jesus hangs powerless with a gulf between his judges and him precisely because he does not compete for any sense of their definition of might. He threatens because he refuses to compete for their space. And the threat instigates his judges' response – to mock, to shame, to silence. But even that doesn't do the deed. Jesus is already silent. Is there a possibility that we can inhabit a space that does not need to be incessantly defended and protected, where boundaries are proscribed between the outsider and me? What would it mean to live into this truth of defenseless love so habitually that I am genuinely at home with all my frailties and poverties, and those of others?

In the final scene of Shakespeare's King Henry IV, which is set near Westminster Abbey, the newly coronated King Henry V and his retinue are emerging from the pageantry as Falstaff, his longstanding sidekick awaits his old friend and now king. Falstaff is by all measure a complex character, zany, indulgent, an antiquated criminal, a paladin of puns. He is also a close friend and mentor to the young boy Hal as he refers to his companion – now King Henry V. As the newly crowned King Hal approaches, Falstaff is full of happy expectations of the warm embrace he will receive as he greets his king:

"God save thy Grace, King Hal! My royal Hal!"...
"My King, my Jove! I speak to thee, my heart!"...

King Henry first tries to ignore the old man, then he seeks his Chief Justice to silence him, though neither work. King Henry finally speaks the piercing words:

*"I know thee not, old man, fall to thy prayers....
I have turn'd away my former self;
So will I those that kept me company."*

The King completes his address and sweeps onward with his court without a backward glance. We can only imagine the stinging pain that Falstaff felt at that moment. To be forgotten. One can proffer, therein lie the seeds of madness, to immolate another's memory, to cast it on the pyre of one's need for self-preservation.

We catch a penetrating glance into this notion of "being remembered" in today's story. What is it in the *conditio humana*, the fathomless need in the human condition to be remembered, to not be forgotten, brushed aside? Arguably, Luke's finest contribution to the passion story amongst all four gospel accounts, may be the scene of Jesus and the two criminals. For only in Luke do they engage in conversation. The first sorry soul to speak is caught up in the taunts of the soldiers, bitter in pain, fighting back his fate he sneers, and cries out for help in the same breath, *"what a deceiver you are Jesus – you a messiah – now's your moment – prove it!"* This provokes a rebuke from the criminal on the right, *"how dare you sneer in the face of God, we deserving of this fate, not he. Remember me when you come into your kingdom Jesus."* And Jesus responds *"I will remember you. Today you will be with me."*

Forgotten by all others, the never-to-be-forgotten of God. Ancient is this need.... to be remembered. We glance back at pitiful Falstaff with the dagger still dripping – another criminal forgotten, ousted, a left over.

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And what say you here today?

This morning the entry point into this Passion Week, we stand together in a thin place. We are invited today into this ancient story, to be the players, whoever we are, and from wherever we come. In this holy week, you are invited to bring your worst self and your best self; your dressed up and your dressed down self; your indignation and your shame; your deceptions and your hopes; your feelings of belonging or not. The temple curtain has been ripped asunder, and the thunder has cracked in Isaiah's message from last Sunday.....

“Come in, join our motley band of pilgrims, behold I am doing a new thing. Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

- *I have formed you.*
- *I know you.*
- *And – I – will – remember – you.”*