

Sermon: And All of Them Said the Same

New North Church, Hingham

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25 March 2018

Based on **Psalm 118; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Mark 14:1-31**

In our proclamation today, we read that when the ‘great crowd’ heard that Jesus was on his way, they reacted joyfully and went out to meet him, just as we did, shouting ‘Hosanna!’ which means ‘we are saved!’ ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’ And they waved palm branches, just as we did.

He arrived humbly, riding a donkey, signaling his peaceful intentions even as he fulfilled a prophecy from Zechariah. So, what went wrong?

Partly, it went wrong because they called him a king. King Herod wasn’t really, but the emperor was, and he had strong feelings about it, and he didn’t share power. But things went wrong mostly because Jesus had resuscitated Lazarus. Because of this, the chief priests and Pharisees, fearing that the people would come to believe in Jesus, wanted him dead. The chief priest Caiaphas, perhaps for his own reasons, prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation (John 11:45-53). He happened to be right somehow.

We’re getting ahead of ourselves, so let’s review the day’s lessons.

Does anyone remember the National Lampoon? They had a magazine, a radio program, did some comedy records, and made some films back in the Seventies and Eighties. At one point, they recorded a parody of a New Age poem called *Desiderata* and called theirs *Deteriorata*, which was pretty funny, for the times. Anyway, at one point the narrator says, “Make peace with your god, whatever you perceive him to be: hairy thunderer, or cosmic muffin.” And that, I think, captures in the extreme the differences in how modern-day people perceive God between the two Testaments: in one, God is the mighty warrior with a hair-trigger temper, and in the other, God is love.

But Psalm 118 ought to put that to rest. God’s steadfast love is mentioned three times in our reading, four times in the first four verses, five times in total.

The Hebrew root word for God’s strong and compassionate, fiercely loyal steadfast love, means a mother’s womb.

In its time, this was countercultural – the gods of antiquity were indeed hairy thunderers who didn't care at all about human beings. Describing a God whose steadfast love endures forever was something new and radical.

This lesson reminds us of several things: that we are loved and cared for unconditionally, that we can trust God will continue to be God, and, even though God has delivered in the past, we will need saving again in the future. For the church, God's ultimate saving act was in sending Jesus. This lesson teaches us to say, 'thank you.'

Jesus' Passion is rooted in the Old Testament tradition. The Gospel writers all dip into the only Scripture they knew, looking for parallels that could help them find meaning in Jesus' suffering. They often turn to Isaiah. In these chapters, commonly called Second Isaiah, God promises restoration and a return from exile.

Today's second lesson offers a new vision, one of four so-called Servant Songs in Isaiah. Here, the servant declares his obedience to God, and how God helps him, and how when they stand together, no one can contend with him. But if we keep reading, we see that the people reject the servant; he suffers at their hands. Why?

Maybe because the people are faithless, or stubborn, or maybe they had become accustomed to life in Babylon. Maybe they didn't want to give up what they had for an uncertain future. In any event, Christians see Jesus in these passages, the Jesus who offered an alternative way of life that put God at the center, a way a person can *choose* to walk and willingly endure for love. It is also a path away from suffering and abuse, and toward God who offers healing and wholeness. To suffer is not God's purpose for us.

If this Scripture were Scottish, it might be called the 'Stand Fast!' passage.

The lectionary wanted us to read two full chapters from the Gospel according to Mark, but that's a little much. And we split what we did read into two sections, one, so we could fit in another hymn, and, two, to highlight some of the tensions that this last supper exposed among the disciples.

In the first section, Jesus repeats his habit of eating with undesirables, in this case, Simon *the leper*, even while the chief priests and scribes are out there plotting to kill him. And, then, an unnamed woman anoints Jesus, a move that anticipates both his death and burial. She acted boldly, gave her best, and was rebuked. Later, Jesus says that 'what she has done will be told in remembrance of her,' except we have no idea who she is.

So, we know, but the disciples don't, that the plot is in motion. Things are happening that we can't see. It's unclear whether Judas intended to betray Jesus before this very moment. Was it the expense of the sard that pushed him over the edge? Because Mark says, '*then* Judas Iscariot [...] went to the chief priests in order to betray him.' His betrayal seems spontaneous. We know from the other Gospels that Judas was a thief, and, of all people, the keeper of the purse.

Was it the love of money, the root of all evil, that made him do it?

In the middle of the second section, we learn that Jesus has the whole dinner planned out: go see this guy who will bring you to another guy who will show where we will eat the Passover together. And it was so. Just another thing the Son of Man can do.

After Jesus and the disciples arrive for dinner, get settled in, and begin to eat, the story gets even more interesting: Jesus announces that one of them will betray him, and Judas isn't even there.

The disciples, his closest followers, the ones who have been with him the longest throughout his ministry, react in a very human way: they are distressed.

Then they eat the meal; Jesus breaks the bread and takes the cup and then makes a promise that he will never again drink wine until he drinks it in the kingdom of God, which is a future event.

Then they sing *the* hymn, which maybe we're all supposed to know, and go out to the Mount of Olives, which is where the garden of Gethsemane is, on the east side of Jerusalem. There, Jesus tells them that they will all become deserters, and that Peter will deny him, which is an awful accusation, given Peter's stature among the disciples. And here again is a very human reaction, and it's why we stopped reading where we did: "Peter said, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.'

"And all of them said the same."

And yet, all of them did desert. They couldn't help it; they were afraid for their lives after Jesus was arrested and taken away. They knew what had happened to John the Baptist. This was serious business. Suddenly, all of Jesus' warnings and talk of being lifted up and dying on the cross became very real.

But even though they all deserted Jesus, they all loved him. And even though he was betrayed, deserted, and denied, Jesus loved them all the same.

The unnamed woman in Mark gets it; she understands Jesus, and she knows what's coming next. The named disciples, on the other hand, often behave as if they don't get it, that they have no idea who Jesus really is. That may be where we find ourselves sometimes too. There is so much going on here, who can pinpoint all that Jesus is and does? We all experience God in different ways, and Jesus as the Son of God means different things for each of us too.

But what have these three passages told us about God today? That the God of the Old Testament is ever-faithful and has nothing but steadfast love for us. That the Servant might suffer, and us too, as the disciples feared, but that God will lift us up and make us whole. And that Jesus loves us no matter what we do. We've seen him get angry, with Peter and with the exploitation of the poor in the Temple. We've seen his patience and compassion too, and his deep understanding of the human condition. And we've heard him called Messiah, King, and Son of God. He is all these things.

The Scripture we read week after week intends to remake us 'for a new world no one sees yet,' as the Rev. Prof. Mary Luti says.¹ Today's readings make us wonder, what would we have done, had we been there? Would we prefer to stay in exile? Would we hang around in a hostile environment after witnessing Jesus' arrest? How might we change the story?

But this is the day the Lord has made, and it leads us into Holy Week where all these events unfold. We're free to reflect on what comes next, to wonder where God was on that night 2000 years ago, and on how God is at work in the world today.

In recent days, students marching against gun violence have called on us to find another way to live, just as Jesus gave us a choice between the light and the darkness, between good and evil, love or death, and made us choose.

Amen.

¹ Rev. Prof. Mary Luti, <https://sicutlocutusest.com/2018/03/23/who-is-the-god-who-wants-me-to-do-it/>, accessed 23 March 2018.