

Luke 19:28-40

Passion Persistence and Peace

Sunday March 24, 2013

Rev. Susan Cartmell

The Congregational Church of Needham

This month we have been talking about the connections between Judaism and Christianity. We have looked at the links between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. We have examined the Lord's Prayer – one of our most cherished Christian prayers - only to find its roots in Hebrew worship. We have talked about Jesus, and how we know he was Jewish. If we had a pop quiz with a question about his religion we could pass that test, but for most of us it still seems like a fact that is disconnected from our own ideas about Christ. We look at his arguments with the Pharisees and forget that they were family squabbles within a tribe. Over the years we have come to see Jesus as a Christian who masqueraded as a Jew. We think of him as someone God planted in a Hebrew village so that he could start a new religion and leave his Jewish past behind.

We assume that Jesus is ours, not theirs. We understand him. So this whole month of sermons has been very humbling. It has been humbling to realize that Jesus was always Jewish. If he debated with his people it was to improve his faith, not abandon it. It has been humbling to see that if we want to get closer to Jesus we will have to learn more about his people and their stories. It has been humbling to see that this distinction we make between Christians and Jews is a perilous one. For when we distance ourselves from the Jews we separate ourselves from all the people whose stories we love in the Bible. For they were all Jews- every single one of them.

Perhaps if people had realized our connection to our Jewish brothers and sisters sooner, we would not have had so many shameful examples of anti-Semitism in the history of the Christian world – long ago and even today. Today is Palm Sunday. Nowhere in the Bible is our connection to Judaism closer than at this time of the year. Palm Sunday falls within days of Passover. The Bible says that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. The connections between these two holidays – Christian Holy Week and Jewish Passover – are everywhere. Often we miss them; we are so used to ignoring Judaism. But whenever you go to the grocery store to buy Easter eggs or candy you have to pass stacks of matzos at the end of the grocery aisle. So we bump into our neighbors- shopping for their holiday meals- just buying things for a different menu.

So we come to Palm Sunday – this curious holiday at the start of Holy Week. Today we encounter a parade of the faithful. We find a demonstration of affection for Jesus. We see that though Jesus is a prophet and healer from a little town in Galilee – he has a huge following among the people in the Capital- who recognize him as soon as he entered the gate.

There is something very nerve-wracking about this story too. We all know what will be happening to Jesus this week. We share a sense of foreboding. We enter the scene searching for clues, and a deeper message for our lives today.

The first thing we notice is the way Jesus arrives. He tells his disciples to hire a colt. Such a beast would barely carry a full-grown man he would seem awkward with legs dangling almost to the ground. All the pictures of Jesus that day show him with his head low sitting upon this humble creature. You have to wonder what Jesus was trying to communicate. Modern Bible scholars point out that this demonstration was not the only one happening in Jerusalem that day. While Jesus entered through one gate on a colt, another man entered the city from the opposite side. That was Pontius Pilot, governor of Judea. An angry man at the best of times, Pilate hated the Passover story about rebellious Hebrew slaves who prevailed against the Pharaohs, and resented the fact that he had to leave his villa every year to stay in Jerusalem and make sure no fire bands staged their own rebellion.

It was a dicey holiday for a Roman governor, even a ruthless one, intent on maintaining control. So modern scholars believe that Pilate would have entered Jerusalem in a grand display of military pomp- determined to frighten even the feistiest zealot. He would have ridden a stallion, leading extra legions of Roman foot soldiers in a massive show of military strength. When the Jews lined the streets to greet the governor, I imagine their applause was polite and reserved if they applauded at all. They understood what he was saying with his procession.

It was quite a different demonstration that Jesus was leading across town. While Pilate was haughty and disdainful, coming to warn the Jews to submit to his authority, Jesus was humble and determined. While the people hated Pilate, they exploded with joy when Jesus arrived. Their hearts were thrilled to see an alternative to Pilate's Roman rule, and they laughed with Jesus at his clever spoof, an open affront to the Roman governor. They ripped the palms from the trees, and entered the street theatre staged by the Galilean prophet.

**What can we learn from this story for our lives today?** I have only one point today. I believe it is one of the great gifts of the Jewish people to the world, and to our faith. It is a message which Jesus demonstrates here in this

story. It is **Perseverance**. Throughout history the Jewish people have shown us how to live with perseverance. Whatever obstacles they faced the Hebrews were stubborn and doggedly persistent. Israel is such a powerful country today that we forget what an insignificant one it has been throughout history. Yet many empires underestimated the Jews because they failed to appreciate the power of passionate persistence. Often the underdogs, outmaneuvered militarily, still they were not defeated.

This juxtaposition of Roman soldiers armed to the teeth on one side and unarmed enthusiastic peasants on the other demonstrates the frequent role of the Jewish people. They were rarely on top. They were seldom victorious. But they prevailed. Their scripture and holy stories tell of a character trait we could learn from. They survived because somehow they knit wisdom out of the threads of defeat, and drew strength from even the hardest afflictions.

Their religion was itself born in a time of hopelessness. 600 years before Jesus was born, the Jews were living in Jerusalem when the Babylonians gained control of the region, and mandated a forced deportation to Babylon. It was every bit as devastating then as the cattle cars were in Germany. People with less grit might have given up, and assimilated—if they survived at all. But instead they spent those 50 years in exile re-thinking their faith. They had always associated their faith with the land of Israel, so they had to re-consider it all. If their faith was not tied to the land, it must be more portable. It must be in the stories of Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob and Moses. For the first time they took scrolls and wrote the stories down, to preserve them, and make it possible to be a Hebrew in any territory. They realized that the Babylonians sought to obliterate their identity, so they began to keep kosher to make sure that they ate in a distinct way every day, and never forgot who was Jewish. It was a brilliant peaceful form of passive resistance. And out of the ashes of that time in exile the phoenix of a new religion was born. In that stubborn valiant moment they crafted an identity which has fueled their survival against the odds for generations since.

We all assume that great things happen by chance to folks who are lucky. But that is wrong, so wrong. Great things happen through the dint of stubborn determination. When you see a stubborn streak in your child it is a blessing and a curse. If you have the patience to hone it and work with it and refine it, stubbornness holds the seeds of greatness when it becomes perseverance.

In 1870 John Roebling got the idea of building a bridge connecting New York with Long Island. All the experts dismissed the idea as impossible. Roebling worked with his son, a young engineer who caught his father's enthusiasm. Father and son made progress as they developed a plan for overcoming the obstacles in building the Brooklyn Bridge. It

was well underway when an accident at the site killed Roebling and injured his son so badly that he could not walk or talk. Skeptics felt justified. Despite his inability to walk or talk his mind was sharp and he was not discouraged. Lying in his hospital bed, he looked out his window and looking up for help, he felt that he received a message that he should not give up. Suddenly an idea hit him to use his finger to communicate through his wife. He developed a code and through her he tapped out messages for 13 years to tell the engineers what to do. That is how the Brooklyn Bridge was built.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem, he knew he would be tested- at every level. But as a Jew he also understood the subversive power of perseverance. When we consider what the Jewish people have had to face- we can take courage and thank God for our connection to their gritty faith.

The Jewish story also reminds us that we have choices in life. We can decide whether to give up or ride on. We don't have to feel so overwhelmed or defeated. There may be things in your life that seem daunting. There may be issues at work that are scary. There may be family issues that never go away. There may be things in your own life that you wish you could do differently, and they seem to defeat you again and again. As a society we face problems that seem intractable- on-going budget stalemate and uncertainty, climate changes that are getting more worrisome, steady level of violence in our cities and in our suburbs and in the rural regions too. It is easy to become overwhelmed. It is natural. But we have decisions to make each day. Therein lays the hope.

When Jesus arrived at Jerusalem the sensible thing would have been to go home. What could possibly come out of this mess? Sometimes the bravest thing you will ever do is simply to put one foot in front of the other and keep on.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.