

“Amazing Love”

Mark 11:1-11

Palm / Passion Sunday, April 9, 2006

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Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ²and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” ⁴They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹¹Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Prayer.

It is a popular gripe, and one that I am not totally un-sympathetic towards: “preacher, the God you’re preaching about in the Gospels on Sunday just isn’t the God we get the other six days of the week.”

In the Gospels we hear about God’s core values: grace, love, peace, justice, forgiveness of sin, and (the big one) resurrection from the dead and eternal salvation. Yet, when we take a look around us we see an emerging century that is more violent than the last. In the 20th century we may have had geo-political wars and extermination camps, but in the 21st century we have suicide bombers, religious fanaticism, and state sponsored rape, torture, and terrorism on unprecedented scales. Just when we think it can’t get any worse, ... it does.

How we long to return to Mayberry; to allow Otis the town drunk to lock himself up on Saturday night, tolerate a bumbling deputy who can only be trusted with only one bullet, and to join Andy and friends in the front pew in church on Sunday.

If life were only this simple. But it’s not. Babies are not delivered by a stork, all clean, rapped in white cotton blankets, and sleeping 24 hours a day. Babies are born into this world in a fight, a struggle for survival. Birth is messy, filled with bodily fluids, with lots of crying, screaming and gasping for air.

If life were only pain free. But it’s not. We don’t have to search too hard to find examples of tragic disease, suffering, and death. Consider the mother who prayed every day, twice a day, for her daughter who had a

rare blood disease, only to have her die at age sixteen.¹ Consider the one who suffers from bone or pancreatic cancer, ALS, or Alzheimer's.

We see the strapping Lou Gehrig standing before a microphone in Yankee Stadium and humbly begin "Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about the bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of this earth."² We think to ourselves, that poor son-of-a-gun, if only he knew what he had to look forward to in the next two years – the last two years of his life.

I think to myself about the life long member of the Board of Trustees in my first church out of seminary, who, when learning from his doctor that he had prostate cancer, put a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger ... only to survive two additional weeks at Strong before succumbing to his despair.

"Preacher, the God you're preaching about in the Gospels on Sunday just isn't the God we get the other six days of the week."

So like Don Quixote we go searching on a lifelong quest for answers. Sometimes our search is from within the church, but more often than not, we go looking to others outside of the church, outside of classical theology, apart from the seminary trained, well-intentioned pastor and the Lily-white church going crowd.

We watch and listen for clues, for how friends and neighbors make sense of this tough dilemma. We teach ourselves how to respond, taking our cue from those we admire, know, and respect. Those who wail, shriek, and rend their clothing at a funeral – where do you think they learned to behave this way? So what can be learned from our quest to answer this deep, dark question about suffering?

We hear the unbeliever question, "Why does this happen to me?" This appears to be a perfectly logical question. But when it dawns upon us – just who are you asking? – we know that this superficial question leads us nowhere.

Then we begin to hear the believer question, "Why, God, did this happen?" We become more deeply drawn into the question of suffering, for we know that if believers even question, then there must be something about the nature of suffering that can stump even the brightest and most educated Christians.

If we are patient and perceptive, one can even sketch out a strategy for answering such questions without really answering them. Like a double talking politician, we learn the language of justification. You've heard it before. The smug believer will make the point, "pain is educational." Pain is meant to teach us something – I don't know – it should make me more tough, or disciplined, or humble, or something.

I'm sorry, I didn't ask for any more education! I just want to be saved from this agony.

Then, there is the phrase "God never puts more on us than we can bear." Well, I'm here to tell you that sometimes suffering comes to people who can't handle any more. It puts them way over their limit. If you don't believe me, come with me and make a few visits to inpatient hospital psychiatric wards. I've signed enough people in to these units in my life that I know there are plenty of people for whom life has dealt them more than they could handle and they were simply overwhelmed.

¹ William H. Willimon, Pulpit Resources, April 9, 2006, pg. 10.

² Lou Gehrig, farewell speech, July 4, 1939, as found at <http://www.lougehrig.com/about/speech.htm>

When Rabbi Harold Kushner is asked the question, “Why, God, did this happen? Why do bad things happen to good people?” He responds, “What? Do you believe God is your personal errand boy?” Physics happens. Biology happens. People wear out, wear down, and die.”

Robert Farr Capon says that God isn't like a pathetic mechanic who roams about night and day ready to pounce on distressed motorists, fix our broken down cars, and send us on our way. God, says Capon, is more like the one who comes upon you on the side of the road and sits in your car with you through the night, weeping with you, showing empathy for your plight.³

Oh, please. That may be fine for you to say. That may be what the world believes. But when you're the one broke down and over the edge, the last thing you need is to be joined by a do-good crybaby.

Life and death; for everyone that is born, one is bound to die. To Orientals it is the big ying and yang thing. To Afrikaners, it is the circle of life thing. The skeptic in me wants to scream and shout – “we are only attempting to justify a God who is an empathetic but disengaged therapist!”

But beware! If we succumb to the world's notion that God may be loving but not an interventionist, that God set up the world and then left it to its own ends, then we will have fallen into the population pool where faith becomes irrelevant.

Welcome to the world of Deism.

Deism is a seductive belief that faith in the modern world abdicates God from all responsibility and relationship, and it sets us up to run things the way we want. It says “I am in control! I am in command! It's my life, as Bon Jovi sings,

*It's my life
It's now or never
I ain't gonna live forever
I just want to live while I'm alive
(It's my life)
My heart is like an open highway
Like Frankie said
I did it my way
I just wanna live while I'm alive
It's my life⁴*

It's my life and I am going to live it the way I want, according to my rules.”

Deism puts the self in control, and turns a cold shoulder to God and to neighbor. This explains how we've gotten to where we are at today: where good Christians can go to church on Sunday, and become a-moral, greedy, self-serving, mean spirited, intimidating capitalists the rest of the week. This explains how we can talk the good line about this being a Christian nation based on moral and family values, only to engage in pornography and exploitation, abuse and addiction, sin and vice, violence and warfare, the other six days of

³ William H. Willimon, Pulpit Resources, April 9, 2006, pg. 11.

⁴ Jon Bon Jovi, “It's My Life”

the week.

Deism tells us to look at our Palm Sunday passage through the lens of our modern world. “Jesus, get off that poor old donkey, and ride into town on a real steed! The crowds adore you! Your polls are going though the roof. March right up to Pilate and take back the kingdom, and kick their Roman butts all the way back to Caesar.”

But then, surprise! Despite ourselves, God intervenes.

We become eyewitness to the movement and revelation and miraculous nature of God. Someone comes away from the altar rail healed. Somebody is the recipient of a miracle. A life gets uplifted, changed, a future rearranged, and we realize that God is not as inactive and disengaged as we were led to believe.

We realize that the crux of the issue isn't that God doesn't act, rather that God doesn't intervene according to what we want or when we want it. Our self-centered, Deistic world deflates and collapses into ruin.

It isn't that God doesn't do anything. He just doesn't do the thing that we want, when we want it, all the time. While we want God to sit, and jump, and fetch according to our every whim, the only way for God to be sovereign is if we allow him to rule on his terms.

Jesus puts a new tool into our toolbox when he tells us, “the wind blows where it may. We neither see from where it comes or to where it goes.”⁵ This is an effective metaphor for the true, sovereign nature of God as Holy Spirit.

This is a very hard pill for us to swallow. It means that Jesus enters Jerusalem to cheering and adoring crowds. But it also means that he allows himself to be denied and betrayed, arrested and scorned, suffering crucifixion and death upon a cross, and burial in a tomb. It isn't our way. But it is God's way.

Oh, we so long for faith that is much simpler. We wish God would just serve it up to us on a silver platter and tell us what to believe. We would so love to return to Mayberry. But our ways are not God's ways. We don't have to understand or be in control. All that is necessary is to return sovereignty to its rightful owner.

The Palm Sunday question is this: will you worship such a God? Will you lay down your life before such a Savior and follow Him down the narrow way He walks this Holy Week? This is the Word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ John 3:8