

"Where are You in the Story?" March 29, 2015

Where Are You in the Story?

Palm/Passion Sunday

Rev. Ruth Martz

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This morning, we move from celebrating Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the events of Holy Week, to what is called the Passion of Jesus, that is, his suffering. This Sunday is a day of mixed emotions, much as it undoubtedly was for Jesus, his disciples and the crowd surrounding him. As you hear Scripture this morning and throughout Holy Week, notice the contrast between individuals, small groups and the crowd. Where are you in this story?

*Mark 11: 1-11

"When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and 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. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it.⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

*"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest
heaven!"*

Then 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."

Where are you in this story? Notice which of these positions especially resonates with you right now in your life.

Perhaps you are one of the disciples, walking close to Jesus on the donkey, feeling protective of your leader as well as excited by the crowd welcoming Jesus like a king. Your heart is filled with hope and you give yourself over to the joy of these moments. Yes, things can be changed for the better; through Jesus, we can treat our neighbor with love and experience peace among us! Perhaps you are such a hope-filled person in the crowd shouting *Hosanna!*

Or do you identify more with the disciple who may be lagging a bit behind Jesus? Although you feel the joy around you, you greatly fear what lies ahead. It is always risky to speak bold words questioning and criticizing the powers-that-be, and you don't know if you're ready for the possible repercussions. How much are you willing to risk as a disciple?

Perhaps you are on the sideline, watching this procession with skepticism, because when it comes to politics and those in power, there's not much change for the good for ordinary people like you. You see only failure and disillusionment in the weeks to come.

Or you may be standing at even more of a distance, part of a small group shaking their heads, because what you want is a strong military leader who will call people to battle and destroy the enemy. Peace talks sound good but are continually stalled year after year.

Then again, you may be the one who is in a leadership position, not necessarily acclaimed with *Hosannas*, but an individual to whom others look for guidance. Perhaps you tend to be the spokesperson or someone with the courage to go out on a limb on behalf of others.

Where do you find yourself in this story? Of course you may identify with more than one character or attitude. If you focus on what strikes you in particular, however, and if you take the time to reflect upon it, you will be amazed at what emerges. And the story continues.

*Mark 14: 1-11 “It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said, “Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.”

While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way? ⁵ For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her.

But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. ¹¹ When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.”

Where are you in this story? A group of priests and legal experts conspire behind closed doors to arrest and get rid of this rabbi who ignores their authority and insults their traditions. When have you refused to listen to new ideas that may upset you? Are you the one who resists change that will disrupt your life? Well, I guess we all do that! When has your authority been challenged?

From the priests and legal experts, we move to an intimate setting around the dinner table, in the house of Simon, who is not one of those in power, for he has a skin disease. First it is only Jesus and a woman, then some of the other guests speak—probably the disciples and other followers of Jesus. They are like voices from the peanut gallery whose scolding intrudes on the scene that they are witnessing.

Are you the one like Jesus who is sad or anxious, who is facing something difficult, and who needs another person to embrace, comfort or support you? In what area of your life do you feel alone or in need? Perhaps you have been touched recently by an unexpected gesture of kindness and generosity. You may have recognized it as a holy and beautiful moment. You are the one who give thanks for the gift and the giver. *Truly, I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.* Wow, now that is gratitude!

Or perhaps you are the woman who breaks open the jar of expensive perfume and pours it on Jesus’ head---an intimate and extravagant gesture of love, an offering of yourself that doesn’t count the cost. You don’t worry what others will say or think; you see a person in distress and you must do something to care for him or show her that she is not alone.

Then again, you may be watching this astonishing interaction, and you feel uncomfortable, disturbed, even angry. This woman shouldn’t be giving such a lavish gift; it is all out of proportion, it is completely inappropriate. How dare she interrupt our meal! How dare she waste money in this way! There are a lot of people who could really benefit from such funds. You use your resources in a much more responsible and reasonable way.

Or are you Simon, the one who stays in the background, the humble host who provides opportunities for people to come together and share a meal, who opens up space for the unexpected and the holy?

Or you may instead be a mediator like Jesus, the one who supports an outsider who is being harassed or bullied, threatened or rejected by angry people.

Where are you in this story?

This reading ends where it began, with the group of priests--and someone else enters the scene, Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve who probably just left the house of Simon. An opposite kind of giving takes place; Judas gives Jesus up, abandoning and betraying him. Judas is a lone individual, disillusioned and angry, deeply troubled. He doesn't belong to either group, not to the priests or Jesus' disciples, and yet he is the link between them. The tenderness and peace that Jesus experiences when the woman anoints him turns sour and tragic. Judas offers only betrayal and the priests are pleased; they will use their money to encourage Judas and discourage dissension.

When have you been the one who broke a promise? There may have been times when you were so angry or disillusioned with another person that you started badmouthing him. Or you really wanted to retaliate against someone who disappointed you, hurt you or who didn't give you what you needed.

At Jesus' last supper, each disciple exclaimed: *Is it I, Lord, who will betray you? It's not me, is it?*

Where are you in this story?

This coming week, when we hear the story of the Passion in Worship or read it on our own, we must ask ourselves hard questions in relation to the people in power and the fickle crowd who have a hand in Jesus' crucifixion. At the same time, please take note of the individuals who emerge in contrast as signs of hope in the midst of cruelty and death, those who lead us through Holy Week to Easter, thanks be to God.

The woman who anoints Jesus as the Messiah, the Anointed One; Simon of Cyrene who carries Jesus' cross; another Simon, Simon Peter, who weeps; the three women who hold vigil at the foot of the cross; one criminal on a cross next to Jesus who prays: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*; the Roman centurion who proclaims: *Truly, this man was God's Son!*; Joseph of Arimathea who lays Jesus' body in a tomb, the women who rise at sunrise...

One person, one gesture, can make our lives and our world feel like the blessed kingdom of God.

Where are you in the story today? How may God be guiding you toward new life?

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Resources

Huey, Kate. www.ucc.org. “Weekly Seeds” for March 29, 2015.

Merrill, Timothy, Ed. www.homileticonline.com. Commentaries on these Scripture passages.

Scully, Kevin. *Sensing The Passion, Reflections During Lent*. Upper Room Books (Nashville, 2000).

www.workingpreacher.com. Commentaries.