



God of Disappointment

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
Palm Sunday ~ April 5, 2009*

The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, according to Mark: 14:1 – 15:47

The ad ran in the paper the last Sunday of Lent: “Drive through drama. Live animals. Stay in your car.” It was an ad for a Holy Week experience- an opportunity to drive through the events of the last week of Jesus’ life- listening to the story on tape and watching through the car window as the action unfolds. The unwritten continuation of the ad, at least in my mind, was similar to signs you see at drive through African safari parks; “stay in your car- or else you might get hurt. There are live animals out there. Stay in your car for your own protection.” For God’s sake, don’t get too close to this story- you might get hurt.

Can you just see it? Jerusalem is packed- jammed with millions of people. The rumors about Jesus have preceded him. “Have you heard? A king named Jesus is going to come into Jerusalem and take over, overthrow the Romans. I even heard he is the promised one- the Messiah. God is finally going to rescue us- just like God did in Egypt. I can’t wait to see the look on Pilate’s face as he gets sent packing by this Jesus.” Then suddenly the crowd begins to chant; “Hosanna, hosanna to the Son of David”. Louder and more insistently: “Hosanna to our impending rule- hosanna to peace and freedom and justice, done our way”. The crowd is packed in so tightly no one can move. And then he appears. And a ripple goes through the crowd. A ripple of anticipation followed by recognition followed by –confusion. “Something’s not right here. That looks like Jesus, but why is he riding a donkey rather than a stallion? Doesn’t he know that the donkey is what princes ride to show they are unarmed and coming in peace? I thought he was going to lead a revolution and overthrow Rome. This is a disappointing beginning”. And then he gets off the donkey. The crowd goes silent- waiting, wondering what he is going to do now. He walks into the Temple. And they look at each other, nod, and say “maybe now he is going to make the Temple fall down like he said.” Anticipation hangs in the air. But Jesus? He walks into the Temple, looks around, comes back out, gets onto his donkey and says to his disciples, “Let’s go to Bethany.” And leaves. Leaves. Just like that. The crowd falls completely silent. And then a murmur runs through the crowd as someone names out loud what they are all starting to think; “this Jesus is a dud. He hasn’t done anything for us at all. What kind of king is he?” And they grow angrier and angrier. And quietly at first, then more insistently, cries of “crucify him” fill the air. And then, well, we know what happens from here.

What went wrong? What was the crowd so upset about? Had God tricked them, us, with some kind of false promise? No, I think what happened is a fairly simple case of misunderstanding. And it is just a short step from misunderstanding to disappointment to anger.

God consistently disappoints us-mostly because, at heart what we are more interested in what we want God to be than in who God is.

We do a marvelous job of projecting our own wants, needs and desires onto God. Why didn’t I get that job, God- what’s wrong with you? Why did my friend get cancer, why did you let that happen God, what’s wrong with you? Why did my loved one die- if you had been here he wouldn’t have died, what’s wrong with you? Don’t you

care at all? Why do you so consistently disappoint me?

But in a strange way misunderstanding and disappointment may be the beginnings of salvation for us. Each time one of our neat, comfortable, self-serving illusions about God, misinterpretations of God's promise, drops away and we are surprised and disappointed, each time we let go of one of our idols, we make a little more room for the reality of God, for the power and truth of God's promise. Disappointed, we can let go of our requirements of God and begin to see God as God is. Disappointed, we can turn away from the God who was supposed to be in order to seek the God who is.

God is always surprising, which is intimately linked to God's disappointing qualities-always doing the unexpected and quietly or not so quietly turning the world upside down. Jesus carefully planned and engineered entrance into Jerusalem, for example, designed to parody worldly understandings of power, was surprising, even subversive. Jesus took the knowledge of the world, our knowledge, and twisted it, turned it and exposed it for what it is-mostly self-serving and fear driven.

Most surprising, subversive, and if we're honest more than a little disappointing, is the cross – that brutal, violent instrument of torture and execution that appears to trumpet the triumph of the ways of the world. We know, of course, the end of the story. And it is tempting to head right for it. Indeed we are free to rush right from Palm Sunday to Easter – go from a cheering crowd to the empty tomb, from glory to glory. But to do so would be to wallow in our notions of God, notions that will ultimately disappoint us, cheat us of intimate knowledge of the real power and promise of God. Because the promise includes the circus of Palm Sunday and the agony and abandonment of Good Friday. The promise is that God is present with the world – always. Present with those who go from “hosanna” to “crucify him” in a split second. Present with those who turn away from him or worse, betray him- as did Judas, as do we- the faithful One promises to be ever present with the not so faithful. The promise is of a death-defying love which refuses to give up or let go. And it is not a promise which says “life is all about glory – stick with me and life will be grand”. Not a promise that says, “Stay in your car where it is safe”. We misunderstand God's promise – thinking of it as a talisman against misfortune. We think the promise is that if we stay in the car, lock the doors, and try to get through the ride with minimal damage and disappointment, then God will be with us in the next life.

It is indeed not always safe out there. Life is sometimes hard, unpredictable, cruel and most definitely unfair. That is the way it is. And Jesus tells us “believing in me, following me will not change that. Following me will help you see the world in a different way. It will help you see what real triumph is all about. It will help you see what real power looks like. It will help you see what real love looks like. It will help you see that there is nothing that will separate you from me- that even death will not win in the end”. But we can only see, only know what this looks like if we are willing to get out of our cars and walk this week with Jesus. If we are willing to really know that the fulfillment of God's promise always involves struggle and suffering, discipline and death. If we are willing to walk into the upper room on Thursday and share his last meal with his friends, walk with him to the Sanhedrin and then to Pilate's palace, walk with him up a lonely hill and wait with him. Watch. Watch what is horrifically difficult to see and what we don't understand, and likely never fully will. It is not safe out there. It is messy and at times painful. And if we are to be open to the joy of life we must also experience the pain of life. Yes, we can try to play it safe, to hang onto a God who won't disappoint us, to avoid suffering. We can stay in our cars-sort of safe and insulated, and numb and cut off from life. We have that choice. But this week especially I encourage you, I urge you, for God's sake, get out of your car. Yes it is disappointing and dangerous out there and you will experience pain, but it is only out there that you will discover life.