

Narrative Lectionary: The Crucified Messiah

Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018

Susan and I watched the first episode of a documentary called *Wild, Wild Country* the other night. Many of you remember Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, an Indian spiritual leader who came to Eastern Oregon in the early 1980s and attracted followers from all over the world.

As I was watching this, I was trying to figure out what made the Bhagwan so charismatic. One of the things he told his followers was that he was starting a community the likes of which the world had never seen. These followers were going to be in on the beginning of something like a reign of peace. Wouldn't we all want to be a part of that! Of course it ended with the largest bioterrorist attack this nation has ever seen, with attempted murder, with criminal indictments and jail time for leaders of the community.

The Jewish people in the time of Jesus were looking for a leader who could bring about change. They wanted that peaceful kingdom that the religious authorities said was coming. They wanted a messiah who would defeat their enemies, and start a reign of peace. Bring that on! And it seemed like every other week someone would arise and say, I'm that messiah.

So when Jesus appeared, and began to teach about the reign of God; when he began to cure the sick and give sight to the blind, people said, Maybe he's the one. Let's make him king! In this same Gospel of John, Jesus calls Philip to follow him. Philip gets excited about this new rabbi, and he finds his friend Nathanael. When Nathanael meets Jesus, Jesus says, Here is an Israelite in whom there is no guile. And Nathanael says, How did you get to know me? Jesus says, I saw you under the fig tree. And Nathanael says, Rabbi, you're amazing! You've got some kind of special power! You ought to be the king of Israel!

In John 6, when Jesus feeds five thousand people from a little boy's lunch, they get really excited. He can do wonders! Let's make him king!

So here we are on the Sunday before the Passover. Thousands of Jewish people from all over the world are in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Jesus has just brought a dead man back from the grave, and the word has spread. As he rides into

town, the people greet him by cutting down palm branches, a sign of victory, and waving them in front of him. The crowd that had seen Lazarus raised from the dead was there. Hosanna, they say, which literally means, Save us now!

And we think, Well, good for them! They know Jesus is the Savior. But when we look more closely at what they are saying, we realize that the verse they are quoting is from Psalm 118: Save us, O Lord, we beseech you, save us and give us success! Jesus, be the king we want you to be! Take care of all our needs! Bring a reign of peace! Defeat these enemies around us!

But Jesus isn't riding in on a warhorse. He's not coming in on a tank. He rides in on a donkey, a symbol of peace. The Pharisees are there. They have been fighting with Jesus for three years. They look at one another and say with resignation, The whole world has gone after him!

Some Greeks come up to Philip after some of the hubbub has died down. We wish to see Jesus, they say. It's as if the gospel writer is saying, Yes, the whole world wants to see what kind of king this Jesus is. Even the Greeks.

And Jesus takes this opportunity to say what kind of a king he is. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." And maybe they are thinking: Terrific! We want to see God's glory! We want to see the reign of God! But Jesus starts to talk about death: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." In John's gospel, the cross is the glorification of Jesus. He goes willingly to lay his life down for the world.

Jesus will say later in this chapter, And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. The Pharisees had said, The whole world is going after him. On the cross, Jesus will go after the whole world. I will draw all people to myself.

When Jesus is raised on that cross, Pilate has an inscription placed above his head that says, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." The chief priests come to him and say, 'Do not write, "The King of the Jews", but, "This man said, I am King of the Jews."' Pilate says, What I have written I have written.

By the way, the inscription was in Hebrew, and Latin, and Greek, all the important languages of the day. The sign was in Hebrew, the language of the chief priests who wanted Jesus put to death, because Jesus would draw the chief priests to himself on the cross. The sign was in Latin, the language of Pontius Pilate, who condemned Jesus to death, because Jesus would draw the governor to himself on the cross. The sign was in Greek, the language representing the rest of us, because Jesus was going to draw all of us to himself on the cross. God in Jesus was going after the world.

And instead of a king who comes to blow away the opposition, we have a king to offers his life for the world. We have a king who suffers with us and for us.

There is a wonderful scene on the movie, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Jesus and his followers are heading towards Jerusalem, to the final showdown with the authorities, and the disciples are anxious. One of them catches up to Jesus, and says, I'm afraid, Lord. What's going to happen? Is it going to be ok? And Jesus doesn't say anything; he simply puts his arm around this disciple and walks forward with him.

Maybe one of our struggles is that we want a Palm Sunday God who will save us in the way we want to be saved, who rides into our lives and solves all our problems. Or we want to move quickly on to the God of Easter who will bring us newness of life. But we're not so taken with a God who rides into our lives to suffer with us.

David Buttrick, a professor of preaching, in his book, *The Mystery of the Passion*, says that when we start with the story of God in creation, then we have a big, powerful God who creates in a flurry of activity. And when creation tumbles into sin, this God of whirlwind power, this law-and-order God, shows up with tablets of law and tosses them down from Mt. Sinai.

And when we finally get to the New Testament, it feels like somehow God Almighty relents. God unclenches the divine fist and shows a little heart through the cross. Our usual order is to start with creation, with the God of absolute power, and then introduce the cross as the way God moderates that power with love.

But what if we started with the cross and moved backwards to creation? What if God who suffers with us is the very nature of God? What if, as St. Paul says, the foolishness of the cross is at the very heart of who God is? Then perhaps creation

is not just an amazing act of power, but a loving act of giving birth to the universe. Then the giving of the law at Sinai is not so much the action of a tough, rule-giving God, but an act of loving kindness to provide freedom with guidance.

We most clearly see who God as God-in-Jesus suffers on the cross. God rides into our lives, not to blow away the opposition, but to put an arm around us and to walk with us through all the deaths and resurrections of our lives.

Most of us remember when an angry father of three children, a man named Charles Roberts, walked into an Amish schoolhouse back in October, 2006 and shot eleven schoolgirls before he turned the gun on himself. He was angry with God because nine years before, he and his wife had lost their first child 20 minutes after she was born. And yes, they'd had three children since then, but he still was angry with God.

The story of this violence done to such peace-loving families went around the world, but the story that followed was an amazing story of forgiveness. As Jesus rode through the hearts of these Amish people, he gave them the power to reach out to the family of the gunman, and he gave them the power to forgive him for what he'd done. The Amish take the words of Jesus about forgiveness very seriously. More Amish people were at the killer's funeral than there were members and friends of the killer's family.

Charles Robert's family wrote the following letter about two weeks after the killings-

"To our Amish friends, neighbors, and local community: Our family wants each of you to know that we are overwhelmed by the forgiveness, grace, and mercy that you've extended to us. Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. The prayers, flowers, cards, and gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you.

Please know that our hearts have been broken by all that has happened. We are filled with sorrow for all of our Amish neighbors whom we have loved and continue to love. We know that there are many hard days ahead for all the families who lost loved ones, and so we will continue to put our hope and trust in the God of all comfort, as we all seek to rebuild our lives."

Jesus rode through the lives and hearts of those Amish families, and gave them the power to forgive, much sooner than I would possibly been able to forgive. Jesus rode through the hearts of Charles Roberts' family, through the actions of those Amish people who were suffering so, and began the work of healing in them.

Paul says in Philippians, Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, Jesus who said from the cross, Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing. That same mind of Jesus was in these Amish families. We cry out to Jesus today, Hosanna! Save us! Save us from our bitterness! Save us from our unwillingness to forgive! Save us from our selfishness! Save us from our lack of concern for our neighbor who is different from us! And walk with us through whatever life brings. Amen.