

Living a Mystery—Luke 19: 28-40
Palm Sunday—April 14, 2019

I love baptism Sundays. There is so much hope in the air on days like today. Not much different from what the crowd in our faith story must have felt. Everything looked so promising. Here was this itinerant preacher/teacher from a small hick town riding into Jerusalem, into the heart of civic and religious power proclaiming a new vision for a people held under the thumb of Roman rule. Jesus was like an open window that magically appeared in the locked room of their existence.

Jesus knew what he was doing that day. You see his entrance was not the only parade in town. Scholars tell us that there probably had been an imperial parade as well, with Pontius Pilate as the grand marshal. For the major Jewish festivals, Pilate, like his predecessors, travelled from their seaside homes. The Romans wanted to be in the city in case there was trouble. There often was, especially at Passover, a festival celebrating the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire. Pilate would have entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers clad in armour and helmets, carrying swords and golden eagles mounted on poles. Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus' procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God, a kingdom ruled by vulnerable love.¹ The crowd ate it up; they loved it. They were certain Jesus was the one. But, we know how it goes, don't we?

If you're looking for certainty in life than a relationship with God probably isn't for you. Baptism, this rite of Christian initiation isn't about joining a club of people who have all the answers to life's eternal questions figured out. It's more like joining a pack of travelers who are journeying together engaged in a relationship with a Mystery we call God.

But, it's a different kind of mystery than the ones to which we're accustomed. When we think of mysteries, we think of a good book that takes us on an adventure that leads us toward a resolution, toward the solving of a problem. That's how many of us have treated faith in the Protestant tradition, as a problem that needs solving, where we struggle with trying to understand and know the unknowable.

One way we've done this is through literalism—taking every word of the bible as fact. In this approach, the bible is a neat and tidy package that explains everything you will ever need to know about God. Jesus' death is quite simply God sacrificing God's only son for the forgiveness of our sins. This approach asks us to take scripture seriously, but it turns faith into an agreement about facts in which there is no room for doubt or questioning. It's neat, it's tidy, it's manageable—mystery solved.

¹ This paragraph relies extensively and in some places quotes directly from the work of John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg in their book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem*.

The other way we've treated faith as a problem in search of a solution is through liberalism—explaining everything in the bible in terms of scientific, political or social analysis. In this approach, Jesus is a victim of capital punishment, a political murder by the state. Jesus is seen as someone who threatened the power of the religious and political authorities of his day with his message of radical and inclusive love. The liberal lens see the literal interpretation of Jesus' death being a sacrifice for our sins as the gospel writers' and Paul's attempts to make sense of Jesus' death in light of religious practice at the Jewish temple. Faithful Jews would go to the temple to atone for their sins by sacrificing animals. The liberal approach gives us some important insights about the historical realities surrounding Jesus' death. With liberalism, faith is about having the right insights and reconciling the unbelievable in scripture with reason. On it's own It's also neat, tidy and manageable—mystery solved. Both approaches ask little of us. Both literalism and liberalism leave us in control; both make us gods—problem solvers who've got this faith thing all figured out.

Mystery in the life of faith asks more of us, the ones who show us the way are the mystics. Mystics see the life of faith as a mystery as well. But, for them faith is not a problem to be solved. To solve a problem is to make all of our puzzles go away, which isn't the kind of thing we should expect when it comes to God. God is always beyond complete knowing. Religious mysteries are meant to be engaged in a relational way. Faith is a relationship. When we let go of our need for solutions we can enter into a relationship of trust with God in which we surrender our ego, our need for approval, adoration and status and allow ourselves to be used for God's purposes of love, healing and reconciliation. In this way, the Mystery that is God is gradually revealed to us in our lives. When it comes to God, we are not confronted with a problem that needs solving we are confronted with a mystery that can only be revealed to us in a relationship of trust.

Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week; it is an invitation to live into the mystery of faith. Living the mystery of faith in the week ahead moves us from palms to passion. Moves us from dependence on the approval and adoration of others to new freedom in relationship with God. Living the mystery of faith moves us from superficial living to living with passion. Its why, Jesus doesn't lay low in the week that follows; rather he goes into the temple and angrily kicks out the thieves. It's why he can confidently continue to condemn the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. It's why he can be moved the small offering of a poor widow and it's why he can experience the joy and beauty of a grateful follower massaging his feet with expensive ointment. Living the mystery of faith can do the same for us, moving from superficial living to passionate living, to experiencing the heart of God.

That's what happened to Will Campbell. The late Will Campbell was a Baptist pastor in the Southern US. He is best known for leaving a comfortable job as chaplain at the University of Mississippi in the sixties to join the civil rights movement full-time. Campbell became a hero to many and he could have gone on to make some decent

money on the lecture circuit or as a pastor of a big church. But because of Campbell's faith, because of his relationship with God he saw this as a trap, a trap of superficial adoration and ego boosting. You see Campbell believed that Jesus is all about reconciliation, bringing people together who have been set against each other. So, when the main battles of the civil rights movement had been fought and he was at a crossroads in his life he asked himself one question; "whom do I need to be reconciled with?" Although the answer was very uncomfortable to Campbell, it was clear and obvious. Campbell shocked all of his admirers and friends when he decided to dedicate his life to ministry with Klu Klux Klan members and their families. When asked if he really expected to save the souls of such men Campbell replied; "I think that would be presumptuous on my part, they might, however, save mine."

Living the mystery of faith during holy week takes us from palms to passion, from living at the surface, pre-occupation about others' opinions to experiencing the very heart of God. Jesus calls it taking up your cross, losing our lives in order to gain them. What has that looked like in your life? What might that look like? Ayla, Bria, Naomi and Jemma are harbingers of hope today, a hope that is rooted in a relationship with a Mystery. A Mystery that refuses to be solved, a Mystery that calls us into a relationship of surrender and trust. A Mystery that is gradually revealed in our lives as we journey deeper into the heart of God. May this Holy Week move us from palms to passion.

Rev. Joe Gaspar