

Palm Sunday Year C 2016

We are now at the climax of Luke's rhetorical narrative. We began, way back in Advent, with the announcement of John the Baptist's birth, and then the announcement of Jesus birth. We heard prophecies as to what these births meant. Luke, writing at least a generation removed from the life and ministry of Jesus, and in his poetic reverie he relies on the typology of Isaiah ... a voice, a familiar voice, crying in the wilderness, a voice from the margins, a voice persistent after the hearts and minds of the people Israel... The voice of the Spirit; a voice exhorting the people to make way for God's jubilee.... This kind of talk had been seen before with Moses and Elijah, the prophets of old who spoke the truth about power gone wrong, of greed and idolatry, and abusive self-interest... The legacy of the prophets was to speak the truth... holding the people and their rulers to account... and calling them, recalling them to the ways of God.... For Luke this is the awakening of God's Spirit, which for many Jews in his day had been silent for far too long.... The Spirit now on the move... again... moving over the face of the deep once again, bringing revolutionary change....

We heard the prophecy of Mary, the mother of Jesus, speaking of a radical transformation of the socio-economic world... Of a new order in which wealth is shared... in which the shamed are given their rightful dignity... She speaks of a day in which God's justice and mercy will be shared by all... She is speaking of a commonweal in which there is no rank or class; she speaks of a community of shared abundance, and mutual respect... of a good life for all people.

And then Luke's narrative centers on the person of Jesus, the anointed of God, the one greater than John, in the line of the great prophets gone before... Jesus, the true human, sprung from the mythic mind of God to embody the way to eternal life... and by eternal life, I'm not speaking of life after death... Eternal life in the ancient world is a life full of meaning and purpose... of mystery and creativity... a life without disproportioned anxiety... a life in tune with the profound beauty of the created order... a life of joyful empathy with one's neighbor.

The narrative takes us along the road with Jesus and his followers... the road both literal and figurative... literally, the road to Jerusalem, and figuratively the road of the new Exodus, the road to freedom and a noble life.... And the road that is, of course, life itself, fraught with danger and surprise... the road that

defies the mapmaker's best intentions, requiring imagination and improvisation... the road that is laced with uncertainty and contingency... and adventure.

Jesus models the way of life meant for the road: That we teach each other the sacred lore, the wisdom of our ancestors along the way... that we practice the art of healing through touch... that hospitality and welcome are rubrics to live by... that it is for our own salvation and well-being to embrace the stranger... and not just the presentable stranger... but the outcasts and the shunned and the untouchables of our world... and that we are to call out evil... in particular, the staunch injustice, embedded in the institutional structures of our world.... And for Luke all of this takes place in prayer... prayer the artful practice of paying enlightened attention.

Now, I keep saying, the world... that we are to change the world... but note that Jesus changes the world one life at a time... the blind beggar... the paralytic... the centurion's slave... the widows son... the hemorrhaging woman... the boy with a demon... inviting sinners and tax collectors to dinner..... Jesus is modelling an everyday practice... salvation a process, a practice... To change the world is to dignify a life... just the ones given to us on the road... because each human life in the mind of God bears the world entire.... And this practice is not about getting it perfect (that post Enlightenment neurosis)... It is about getting it **true**... and truth is the hard road, the road less travelled by, a road that is dangerous and risky... but it is the only road for us brothers and sisters because all of us are "marked as Christ's own forever" and the road changes us, marks us, We will never be the same once we travel this road in earnest... Some folks of polite company may be loath to travel with us... may not understand, may push back... Are y'all prepared for that? Jesus asks his disciples that same question.

In our reading today we see that the road takes Jesus into Jerusalem, the center of the religious and political establishment... He and his disciples decide to enter the city as protestors, making a mockery of the pomp and circumstance that the rulers and vassals of Rome employ when they enter the city... It was a tradition in the empire that when a ruler or military hero entered a city, the people were to greet them with palm branches and cloaks, and shouts of hosanna... What we are seeing here is a community organized to call out the hypocrisy of their leaders; the Pharisees are horrified, and they beg Jesus to keep quiet... but Jesus doesn't keep quiet.... He proceeds to the Temple, ground zero of Judaism, and drives out the merchants and money changers, calling them out along with the Temple cult, for their self-serving abuse of the people.... And of

course this gets Jesus arrested... and railroaded through a mock trial to torture and death.

This is high rhetoric we're reading... literature meant to move us to action... inspire us to take stock... to call us to the truth.... And the rhetorical question here is: Are you willing to give your life to this road? For Jesus, given the political context in which he lives, following this road cost him his life... prophets are rarely popular with the status quo, the entrenched powers that be... But that is exactly what we are being asked.... Is this Cause, this vision of how we live in God... Is it worth dying for? Luke is telling us that the stakes are indeed that high... Paul calls it emptying... *ekenosis*, in the Greek... That is a thing, and Paul is being intentional about using the word.... it is a philosophical ideal in the ancient academy that the most noble aspiration we might achieve as humans is sacrificing our lives for our brother... for our sister.

Dear people of God... Follow the good road... You'll find good company there... good people who have made the choice that to serve is the only thing... It will be quite the adventure... and there you'll find yourself, alive and vital... Empty yourselves for the cause... and in the great mystery you will find courage and fulfillment... and joy.... So says the Spirit.... alive again.