

## TUMC Sermon, Palm Sunday, March 29, 2015

Scripture Passages: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29  
John 12:12-19

### It's Palm Sunday, Again

Michele Rae Rizoli

Here we are again, Palm Sunday. The kids have come in singing and waving the palms, remembering the part of the Jesus story that is repeated in every one of the four gospels. Every year at the start of Spring, everyone in the Christian tradition around the world remembers the Palm parade at the beginning of Holy Week, in parallel with the Jewish tradition of Passover.

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When my sons were little they'd obsess about a certain book, and each time we'd come to story time they'd want me to read it again. Again? Again. For Eric it was a story called "Let's go Trucks." I mean, it was barely even a story, as I recall, just a bunch of pictures of trucks and cars, and yet we'd read it over and over again. It was comforting, it was familiar and he'd enjoy it! (Fortunately, now at 22 he's moved on and he only reads it about once a week.)

To be honest I didn't really enjoy the repetition, but I did enjoy his companionship during the repetitions. You see, repeated stories are about wondering, and they are about comfort and they are about meaning making. They are also about relationships and context, and in my case about cuddles. This might be why we also repeat the stories of Holy Week together.

Jesus once told his followers that we must all be as children to enter the kingdom of heaven. Maybe, at least in part, this means being open to the repetition of same story; coming at it willing to experience it again and again. Besides, children really don't worry much what the story *is about*, what it *means*, or worse, what it *really* means, they just listen to it, experience it. Now it is a sermon, so I'm going to worry a little about what it means. But I'm inviting you to the spirit in relationship to the story.

If you think about it, we also repeat stories in our relationship circles: family and siblings or friends. We remember and tell events to each other, and give them a place in memory and they play a part in creating the reality and meaning of our life together, our family story.

But did you ever notice how the people in your family often remember things differently? That's what's so fascinating. No one individual owns the way it "really" happened, it's a group effort to sort out in the repetition.

Another thing we do with stories is that we tend to read ourselves into them. When we watch a movie or read a book we most often identify with the hero, or the underdog. Identifying with a story is not a bad thing, that's part of the point of stories, it's inevitable. But moulding as story in our own image and to our own convenience may be a bit of a problem, especially if it is a Biblical story.

So I want to tell you something that happened to me that illustrates this. On St. Patrick's Day, I wanted to post a beautiful Irish song on Facebook called "Deer's Cry" by Shaun Davey. It is based on St. Patrick's famous prayer and brings in elements of creation and an awareness of God's presence that are typical of the beauty of Celtic spirituality.

It starts out with: *I arise today to the strength of heaven, light of sun, radiance of moon, splendor of fire, speed of lightning*, and so it goes until it gets to the part that we are most familiar with:

*Christ within me, Christ before me  
Christ behind me, Christ in me  
Christ beneath me, Christ above me  
Christ on my right, Christ on my left  
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down  
Christ when I arise, Christ to shield me*

*Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me  
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me*

What happened was that I found a Youtube version<sup>1</sup> where someone had paired up these words with images. So far so good, though my imagination was being a bit narrowed by their interpretive choices. It was sort of like when someone turns your favourite book into a movie, it's just never quite right.

Most of the images were pleasing enough, and when they got to the "Christ within me" part that I just read to you, it showed all difference faces: young, old, able bodies, disabled, all different colours of skin. It ended on a poignant image of a young boy who had obviously had a hard life staring into the camera.

OK, it was a bit cheesy, but I could live with it and started to copy the link. But then, at the very end, the image of the boy melted into a white guy with light eyes, long hair and a beard. You got it, he morphed into your standard Western Jesus! Really? That's just wrong on so many levels.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGHWiAGpIP0>

I felt betrayed, I felt manipulated, I was outraged that someone would take such a cosmic vision of Christ, and a song that I love, and turn it into a picture of a handsome white guy. I was furious.

Now, my therapist is working with me on this, and in figuring out that when I'm angry at things like this, apparently there's more going on.

To be clear, Christ is not a white male.

What happened in that video is an example of the tendency, especially of white privileged people – but not limited to us – to think that everything of importance in world is about us. And we need to guard against it especially when we experience the Biblical stories, as I said.

Of course we need to let stories do what they do, and we need to see ourselves in the stories, but we need to let the stories work a little bit in us before we read ourselves too quickly to put ourselves there.

As I came to the Palm Sunday story, with this “anger insight” still hovering in my consciousness, I wondered how this tendency to filter stories through our own experience might affect Palm Sunday.

Let's start with how we normally tell the procession of Palms:

*Jesus was coming in to Jerusalem during the Passover festival and a crowd was following him. He was riding a lowly donkey, not a cocky horse, and people were waving palm leaves around him and shouting Hosanna! Save us. They expected a warrior Messiah but got a prince of peace, Messiah.*

This is how we repeat the story, how we remember it.

Last year Susie Gunther Loewen preached a truly excellent sermon on this reading. Jesus's ride into Jerusalem as street theatre, aimed to mock the military parade that was happening at the same time across town. I urge you to listen to that sermon again. It's on the TUMC website and on a link in this sermon.<sup>2</sup>

I find this a compelling way to remember the story. It's Biblical, it's even biblical in hindsight as the gospel reading points out, and it fits in with and has deeply shaped our value system. Reading this procession as a peaceful resistance to military power has influenced who I am at my core and who we are as a Mennonite church.

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<sup>2</sup> [Gunther Loewen Sermon](#)

There is no doubt for me that the Palm procession has this layer of meaning, and that it confirms and validates a peace perspective and non-violent creative acts in face of oppression.

However, my sermon today, wishes to introduce a bit of tension to that mix.

**I'd like to challenge us not to get too set on *knowing for sure* that an activist or pacifist vision is *all* that this procession means or could mean.**

So it's a challenge and here are a few things that I offer up as part of the challenge.

First are a couple of observations from other people that have spoken to this point.

- Author Will Braun, in an article called "The Case of the Customized Christ" noted that, Jesus' story shows a "conspicuous absence of his success" as an activist.<sup>3</sup> Braun says: "My conclusion, tentative though it may be, is that Jesus' primary focus was not activism or revolution as we commonly understand those terms. It was broader, more nuanced, more mystical perhaps."

So that's one thing to think about. Here's another one:

- A book about Jesus called *The Misunderstood Jew* points out that it is unfair to think that all Jews in the first Century had the same expectation for a Messiah. "There was no single view of a messiah other than the sense that his coming would manifestly change the world... Some Jews expected a Messianic king, others a priest, others an archangel or heavenly figure such as Enoch, and others the coming of the world to come by divine fiat; still others were quite happy with the way things were."<sup>4</sup> Obviously not all of those expectations were militaristic. But we have read that military assumption firmly into the story, sometimes with devastating and anti-semitic consequences.

My challenge continues.

I've also noticed, perhaps you have too, that our context is very very different than for people living this story in first century Palestine or even from the ones telling it to us in the gospel. We live in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, in the northern hemisphere, in a so-called peaceful country with a stable-ish elected-ish government (all our frustrations with current warmongering and fear-inducing policies notwithstanding). We hear this story as people who are in a position of privilege and power.

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<sup>3</sup> "The Case of the Customized Christ", by Will Braun, *Geez Magazine*, Winter 2009.

<sup>4</sup> *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the scandal of the Jewish Jesus*. By Amy-Jill Levine. P.127.

We are in a position of power, you say? Here's a quick test. Can we:  
make choices?  
change our circumstances?  
pull out a credit card?  
plan a trip?  
worship as we please?  
vote someone into office?  
stage a peaceful (or violent) protest?  
"like" something on facebook and think we are changing the world?  
drive around in a car without being profiled?  
get a tax receipt for our charitable donations?  
dream a vision and build something?

Then we are in a position of power.

No, this isn't meant as a guilt trip, though that is a possibility. It's just a statement of fact, it's a mirror I'm trying to hold up to us.

So I wondered, with that in mind, and the story, what would happen, for instance, if we parked the power when we identify with the peasants that were following Jesus. How much more vigour would the protest have if it was rising out of the anger of powerlessness? Something to consider.

But if we can't park that power, how might the story sound different if, rather than rushing to identify with the peasants, or with the disciples or the donkey (as Shane Claiborne suggests) we identified with the people in the story who are in power?

It's kind of scary. But it is interesting. They were the ones wringing their hands because Jesus was going to draw the unwanted attention of the Roman government and get them all killed. They were the ones who plotted to kill Jesus and calculated that "it is better to have one man die for the whole people than to have the whole nation be destroyed." (John 11.50). It was logical and it was self-preserving.

So, the story might be asking us, what calculations do *we* make? What do we wring *our* hands about? What are we afraid of losing?

Finally, my challenge goes back to why we repeat these stories in the first place, especially the story of Jesus' Passion.

With a little inspiration from a talk I heard on CBC ideas,<sup>5</sup> I've come to realize again that we form and repeat belief stories to express deep truths about our human experience. We sort out our reality: good vs evil, cycles of life, hope for the future,

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<sup>5</sup> See Jordan Peterson, [CBC Ideas, History of violence](#)

the deep down what-does-this-mean-meaning-of-life stuffy by repeating these core stories.

Reducing the Passion story to a set of facts or beliefs, or to a fixed meaning, robs us of the opportunity for the story to speak to us and to speak for us on a deeper level.

One of the critiques of Western culture is that we are always wanting to react by “doing” something. What I’m inviting us to with this challenge is to be open to all layers of meaning of this journey that Jesus is on.

As we enter Holy week, don’t do anything to the story. Let the repetition and the depth of the story do something to you.

Let the spirit of Christ inhabit you.