

Sermon 4-14-19
Paul Purdue preaching

Seeing Holy Week

My dad worked as a factory foreman; Mom taught fourth grade. My deeply generous and very frugal parents took us on a trip every summer where we stayed with friends or family. Each vacation included a trip to a museum; Chicago's Field Museum was a favorite. If I lingered over an artifact, my dad eased up beside me and read some intriguing factoid from the little brass explanatory plate. I once fashioned my own "at-la-til" and threw tobacco stick spears into our an empty compost barrel for weeks.

As a high school sophomore, I found myself wandering alone in Chicago's Art Institute. With ten minutes till closing, the crowd had left. As I wandered out, a Van Gogh froze me in my shoes. As if pulled by a magnet, I drew near. The brushstrokes called me closer, and closer still, and then even closer. Lost in the painting, I stood inches away from the masterpiece, when suddenly an alarm shattered the moment. Back in reality, I realized my nose hovered a hair's breadth away from the priceless painting. I stepped back to feel the hand of a 6'2", 250 pound African-American security guard on my shoulder. "Did I touch it?" I asked. "No," he laughed, "but I was afraid you might." His generous smile disarmed my fear. With no named object, he said "beautiful". Hearing the now silent alarm, a docent arrived. The guard assured her there was no problem, but she spoke a few hard words which turned into a lecture about brush strokes, flowers, and post-impressionism. Perhaps, embarrassed by my gaffe or chafed by her art-splaining, her lecture landed with a deadening thud. Thankfully, the closing chimes soon rang, and I hustled out. At the stairs, the big security guard grinned, pointed, and said, "Don't stand too close."

The four Gospels indicate that the Palm Sunday crowd fundamentally misunderstood Jesus. In Matthew and Mark's telling they cry out: "Hosanna to the son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of David!" How could you look at Jesus and see King David? Jesus does not sit atop an eighteen hand war horse, nor ride into Jerusalem at a full gallop with his hair whipping like Absalom's in the wind. Jesus sits astride a colt. His feet drag the ground. He wears no purple robe, nor crown, nor carries a spear. How do they see King David in Jesus? The crowds must have wanted to see a military hero. What do we see in Jesus? Do we see how Jesus healed the crowds, preached peace, fed the hungry, wept over Jerusalem, rebuked the powerful, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, uplifted the downcast, dined with sinners, loved his enemies, and carried the cross? His only crown will be made of thrones. When we look at Jesus, we often only see what we want to see. Will we stand in stunned amazement before the cross, or bend Jesus to fit our frame?

Our self-serving misperceptions may be our oldest and most fundamental sin- to make something less than God our God. The Ten Commandments begin, "I am the Lord your God- don't put anything less than God before Me." At times,

we preachers hold up our systematic explanations like little false god's obscuring the view. Like pesky docents, we trade our belief systems for boundless love that escapes our understanding. Between Palm Sunday and Good Friday, Jesus will sit in the temple and warn to not elevate the lesser rules while "forgetting about what matters: justice, peace, and faith- giving gnats the weight of camels." (Matthew 23) Let us not stand with our checklists and clipboards classifying the burning bush, explaining Gethsemane, or demystifying the cross. God still whispers: "Come no closer, take off your shoes, understand that you standing on holy ground." (Exodus 3) This week, might we trust the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth? (John 16:13)

So I encourage you to meet my sermon with loving skepticism and to challenge any theology that puts too many handles on what first appeared as holy mystery. The burning bush, the Red Sea, the Virgin birth, the blind seeing, the sinner forgiven, the 5,000 fed, the widow's mite, the Transfiguration, the Lord's Supper, the Via Dolorosa, the cross, and the Damascus Road all were revealed first as experiences of holy mystery. The written scripture appears secondary to the holy experience. In his explanatory notes on the NT, Wesley taught, "Scripture can only be understood through the same Spirit whereby it was given." Paul lovingly chides us, "We know that 'all of us possess knowledge.' Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet get it; but anyone who loves God is already known by God." (1 Corinthians 8) Perhaps, the Palm Sunday crowd misunderstood Jesus because they already thought they knew what God was up to. Locked in by what they knew, they made little room for God to do something new. Longing for King David, they missed the Prince of Peace. They could not conceive that their palm branches waved towards the cross. On Friday, stung by injustice and scattered to the wind, the disciples can't imagine the cross might become a sign of victory, forgiveness, mercy, and hope.

What will we see this Holy Week? With the risk of being a pesky docent, let me share what I see in Holy Week. I see beauty, self-giving, and love. There is a beauty to this week that eludes theological classification. Self-giving makes this week holy. Holy Week is not rooted in our modern word "love." Our modern use of love is like the Greek "eros", meaning "pleasing to me". I love corn dogs, I love people who love me, and I love the cello. Holy Week is not pleasing. The cross comes as a wound. Good Friday offends. Dr. King defines agape love as redemptive goodwill for all people. Agape means loving God by loving our neighbors as ourselves- by loving the hateful Good Friday crowd enough to die for our sins. Agape love is not a pleasing emotional state, but a deep ethical commitment. Love serves. Love sacrifices. Love dies to self.

What will we see this Holy Week ?

Will we see love- purifying our worship, by flipping over the money-changers' tables and preventing oppressive and explosive economic conditions? Will we hear love thunder "God's house must be a house of prayer for all nations?" (Mark 11)

Will we listen as love debates the rule-makers' warning us all, "Do not tie up heavy burdens, that are hard for people to bear, don't push others down..."

don't take the title "instructor"... No, greatness is always busy serving others."
(Matthew 23)

Do we remember how Jesus preached during Holy Week: "I was hungry and you gave something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... Truly I tell you, however you treat the least, the last, and the lost is the way you treat the Almighty." (Matthew 25)

Will we let Jesus wash our feet? Will we drink the the cup of forgiveness?

Will we listen as Jesus says, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." And then going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."

Will we all fall asleep, scatter, abandon, betray, deny and crucify Jesus?
Will we take up our cross?

Will we see our opponents and pray, "Creator, forgive them, they do not know!" (Luke 23)

Will we: See from His head, His hands, His feet... sorrow and love flow mingled down?

Did e'er such love and sorrow meet... or thorns compose so rich a crown?

- Will we realize that : love so amazing, so divine,
- demands my soul, my life, my all. (Isaac Watts)

Oh, let us drop our clipboards and checklists. Let us suspend our self-preserving preconceptions and self-assured-knowledge. And let us gaze upon holy mystery. Come closer. Take off your shoes. Recognize every space is holy ground. Kneel in wonder. Bow in praise. Leap in joy. Dance in awe. Only worship. Stand silent before God. How can it be that God would empty God's very being of everything but love for me? "Tis mystery all, immense and free. Inquire no more. Only adore." (Charles Wesley)

Amen.