

Covenant Word

The Road of Possibility

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11

*A Message by
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Pastor
Sunday
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My sister Betty Lou was getting married. There were showers and parties. Presents arrived at the house daily. Our mother had made sure that an announcement was in the newspaper and that there was a caterer, and a florist. The organist and soloist had rehearsed, and invitations had been sent weeks before so that all the guests were en route to the church, as were my parents and my sister. Dad decided that it was the perfect time to reach over, take Betty Lou's hand in his and warmly say to her, "Now, Betty Lou, it is not too late. You can change your mind." And before she could assure Dad, from the back seat came the voice of our very tired Mother, "Oh, yes it is!" Too much was in the workings! No backing out now! Only moving forward to what was already set into motion!

Once a year, thousands of pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. For many, it was a once in a lifetime experience to walk the streets of the City of David, the heart of their history and culture. The Temple, rebuilt by Solomon, David's son, was at the very center of their faith and its practice. Passover itself was a freedom celebration as the Jews remembered and re-enacted their liberation from slavery in Egypt. It was a time of intense patriotism punctuated by the fact that the Jews were still not free. Rather, they were dominated by the foreign power of Rome.

The Romans, therefore, would gear up for this nationalistic celebration. Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, left his headquarters in Caesarea to arrive in Jerusalem with a substantial contingent of troops just in case an insurrection needed snuffing out. The Romans wanted their powerful presence felt as the Jews hoped and prayed and watched for a Messiah to lead them to freedom again. It was not unusual for some wild-eyed radical to make the claim each year that he was the Messiah. The Romans believed these insurgents had to be dealt with quickly. In the eyes of the Romans, Jesus was no different from all the rest.

Jesus was only three years into his public ministry when scripture records that he "set his face steadfastly toward Jerusalem." His disciples warned him of the risks, but even this did not change Jesus' mind. They were in Jericho when Jesus announced that they would celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. Jericho is one of the lowest places on our planet, so to get to Jerusalem, they had to walk 15 miles uphill. The walk alone is indicative of the personal spiritual journey on which we find Jesus. Dag Hammarskjold wrote in his journal, *Markings* (p. 68-69) that Jesus was...

...a young man, adamant in his commitment, who walks the road of possibility to the end without self-pity or demand for sympathy, fulfilling the destiny he has chosen.

I suspect that the crowds of pilgrims on that road of possibility grew thicker the closer to Jerusalem Jesus got. A couple of miles outside of the city, Jesus sends his disciples to the next village in order to untie an ass and a colt for his use. He warns: "If anyone asks what you are doing, just tell them the Lord has need of it." I have to admit that this erupts into absurd scenarios in my head. What if we were walking down University Boulevard and jumped

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into an unlocked car and made ready to drive it away? The owner sees us and runs out of Lucy's Coffee Shop shouting: "Hey, what do you think you are doing?" And you say, "The Lord has need of it. You know, the Lord who resurrects the dead, brings life and restores health. The Lord has need of it." Do you think the response will be, "Oh, well sure, then. If the Lord needs it then by all means take it." I don't think so. It would be more likely that you spend the rest of the day washing ink off of your fingertips, having a mug shot taken, and calling your lawyer. This detail about an ass and a colt cues our understanding with the truth that something has already been set into motion, and there is nothing that will stop it. The gospel writers wish us to understand that this walk down the road of possibility, for Jesus, must continue. Some things cannot be stopped. (Donovan Allan Drake, "If These Were Silent..." Journal for Preachers, vl. XL, Number 3)

What has been put into motion is the peoples' desire for a leader, a leader who will make them great; a leader who will save them; a leader who will conquer the Romans. They are willing to do whatever it takes to put a leader in power. They will



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give their colt and ass over to the cause. They will sell their integrity. They will steal, run over others, and cheer for anyone who will make them great whatever the cost. And so on that road of possibility, the crowds break off palm branches to wave. They spread their cloaks across the road, and they welcome Jesus by hailing him as their king... as the one who will save them. They shout "Hosanna" to this son of David, and Matthew records that the whole city is "stirred." (Drake)

In Luke's gospel, the scribes and priests ask Jesus to rebuke his disciples for this sort of response and Jesus says the oddest thing: "If my disciples are silent, then the very stones will cry out." In other words, we are too far down this road of possibility. There is no stopping now what has already been put into motion. So defined is this path for Jesus that even rocks will cry out to bring his death to completion.

It is an interesting word to use: "stirred." The idea of it has been used before in the very opening chapters of Matthew. For when the wise ones visit with King Herod, it says that Herod, hearing about the birth of a new king, is "troubled" and all of Jerusalem with him. These are words that bring to mind pending danger, revenge, anarchy. Just as there was a king in Jerusalem when Jesus was born, there is a king in Jerusalem now as Jesus enters the city and is hailed as the king...the savior...the messiah who will bring about a revolution. And so the city is "stirred." It is in "turmoil." Jerusalem is "troubled" again by the arrival of Jesus. Upon seeing Jesus, the crowds shout, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" I have always kept these "hosannas" isolated to the streets of Jerusalem, but if you keep reading in Matthew's gospel, Jesus goes to the Temple, overturns the tables AND "the blind and the lame came to him *in the temple*, and he healed them. When the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that he did and that the children continued to cry out IN THE TEMPLE 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' THEY WERE INDIGNANT." In Luke's gospel, the scribes and priests ask Jesus to rebuke his disciples for this sort of response and Jesus says the oddest thing: "If my disciples are silent, then the very stones will cry out." In other words, we are too far down this road of possibility. There is no stopping now what has already been put into motion. So defined is this path for Jesus that even rocks will cry out to bring his death to completion.

In Anthony Doerr's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*, we are introduced to two boys who are enlisted by the Nazi's for training as young soldiers. Some cadets are as young as nine, but they all have blue eyes and cream colored skin. Frederick is from Berlin, a son of an assistant to an ambassador. He is bunk mates with Werner, an orphan, whose only hope to survive is to be a good cadet. Their first conversation goes something like this:

Frederick flutters his fingers and asks, "Do you like birds?"
"Sure."

"Do you know about hooded crows?"

When Werner shakes his head "no," Frederick says, "Hooded crows are smarter than most mammals. Even monkeys. I've seen them put nuts they can't crack in the road and wait for cars to run over them to get at the kernel. Werner, you and I are going to be great friends, I'm sure of it."

Werner, however, is not so sure. As their training intensifies, Frederick becomes more and more removed. Werner, for fear

that Frederick will receive punishment, begins to polish his boots, make his bunk and tutor him for class. Frederick seems to be lost in a dream. Every night, he murmurs bits of poems or talks about the habits of geese and bats as he falls asleep. On their bed post, he keeps a record of each bird that he sees from their window.

Early one February morning, the cadets are roused from sleep. They assemble outside in the freezing cold and find that their commandant has a fettered man staked to the ground. "This man escaped from a work camp," he begins. "He is a barbarian." Each boy is handed a bucket of water, and they line up to douse the prisoner. With each bucket, the prisoner's face empties. He slumps over the ropes propping him up, and his torso slides down the stake. Initially, the cadets cheer when each bucket of water is thrown, but by the time Werner takes his turn, the cheers are perfunctory. Frederick has not cheered once so that by the time he has his turn, Werner fears what is coming. When Frederick is handed a bucket, he pours the water out on the ground. The commandant steps forward, "Give him another." And again Frederick empties the water onto the ice at his feet. He says in a small voice, "He is already finished, sir." He is handed a third pail. "Throw it," comes the command. And as Frederick pours the water onto the ground again, he says, "I will not."

Like sharks on chum, the exposure of the weakest begins an earnest torture. Dead mice are left in Frederick's boots. Excrement is smeared on the lenses of his field glasses. And just when Werner thinks there is nothing left they can do to Frederick, the scales of cruelty tip even further.

Assembled for afternoon drills, the commandant asks "Who is the weakest member of this corp?" The boys all turn to look at Frederick. The commander moves out into the field, he gives Frederick a counted head start. Frederick has until 10 to race ahead of the pack and reach their commandant first. The first day, the commandant counts, "1...2...3...4..." Frederick reaches him just before the other boys. But the next day, the commandant moves further into the field, and his count is quick, "1,2,3,4."

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The boys reach Frederick easily and throw him to the ground. The commandant then hands the largest boy a rubber hose and says, "Do him some good." He strikes him, and after each blow, the commander says, "Again." Werner cannot bear to watch. Instead, he focuses his attention on a hawk circling in the sky. The beating continues until there is a strange dead smack of the rubber. When Frederick is commanded to get up, he does not move. To which the commander says, "In your shining example, Christ, led the way, ever and always." (The book has Frederick's death occur more traumatically. With apologies to Doerr, I did not want to put the congregation through more.)

Oh, the shining example of Christ is that of Jesus traveling that road of endless possibilities, and our watching as He keeps choosing to be steadfast in His devotion to God and His love for us...refusing to give in to the powerful and influential...even when arrested. Beaten. Abused. Ridiculed. Forsaken. Mocked. Nailed to a cross.

The shining example of Christ: more concerned about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.

The shining example of Christ: blessing the merciful and the peacemakers. Giving grace to the grieving and the pure of heart.

The shining example of Christ: cleansing the lepers, teaching the women, laying hands on the children, healing the lame and sighting the blind.

The shining example of Christ: befriending sinners, drinking with drunkards and eating with gluttons.

The shining example of Christ: loving enemies, praying for those who persecute, walking the extra mile and ultimately concerned for the least of these.

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Our lives are an endless road of possibility, and Jesus has need of those who, when handed a bucket of water, will stand firm and say, "I will not." You can be sure that such a stance will trouble your Jerusalem. But you can also be sure that the God who loves you, will not forsake you, but will fill you with the assurance of a coming resurrection. May we live with this hope, Amen.