

Will We Ever Learn?

From the series: A Fresh Look At An Ancient Story

Text: Zechariah 9:9-10; Psalm 33:10-22; Luke 19:28-48

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

This is my thirty-first consecutive Palm Sunday in this pulpit. It has been interesting to leaf through my past Palm Sunday sermon themes and texts. Luke 19, beginning with verse 41, has been my favorite. It occurred to me that you could trace my own evolution, my own emerging understanding of Jesus simply by tracing the Palm Sunday themes and texts over the years. Starting out in the early 1970s, there was the emphasis on Palm Sunday of the parade and the party. There was a subject, for example, "The Exhilaration of Celebration." There was the emphasis on Jesus as the king, the rightful king coming to his rightful place, the agonizing king, the king who came in judgment, wet with tears. I remember that there was also just a little bit of "Schuleresque" in those early Palm Sundays, where we had learned that worship is celebration, that Palm Sunday was a great day to pull out all the stops, and it was fun.

Looking back I also saw where that began to change for me in the early 1980s. I began to see Jesus more in terms of his humanity, more in terms of his prophetic role. I began to appreciate the magnificence of the life and the ministry of Jesus as he spoke truth to power, as he addressed the political, social, and economic movers and shakers on behalf of the poor and the marginalized ones. I began to see how strong, how true he was. Then I preached in 1984 "Jesus, You're Really Somebody."

I continued to probe the theme of grace, the breadth of God's grace, and I began to see that the idea of the atoning death of Jesus was not something that I could really adhere to any longer. If Jesus came from outer space into our space to die for our sin and to open up heaven for us, then Jesus, indeed, was the only way for salvation. But as I began to see that God's revealing and God's grace was of greater extent than just the Christian family, then I began to wonder about that centrality of the atonement. I knew that the atonement necessitated an exclusive gospel. But, if not a savior who died for our sins to make us suitable for heaven, what was Jesus about? I really had to find a whole new paradigm in which to understand him.

It wasn't until 1993 that I braved the elements and expressed myself clearly: Jesus did not die for our sins, but because of our sins. It was the established, entrenched, worldly powers in all of their forms that conspired to bring him to death violently. And it has been that way ever since as we have continued to probe Jesus in his full humanity. He spoke truth to power, bringing upon himself the wrath of the best and the brightest, the establishment of church and state bringing him to death violently.

As a little side note, it is also true that during those days of Palm Sunday celebration in the 1970s, our growth was going off the charts. When I began to sober up a bit and to see some of the superficiality of that and some of the other dimensions of Jesus, our growth leveled off. And when I began to see Jesus as I see him today, everything went downhill. I suspect if you give me another decade I could preach this place empty.

But here we are again, another Palm Sunday, another entrance into Holy Week, another serious engagement with Jesus. We have one more time to remember, to reflect and to try to understand what it means to follow Jesus and what he was about, what brought him to death. I found myself over the years often addressing the current events of the day—the Balkan War, the Gulf War, one or another political, international crisis. It always seemed there was something for Palm Sunday that made Jesus' life and ministry relevant to the current situation. I find it the same today.

Let's just for a few moments imagine Jesus parading into Washington, D.C. Let's just imagine that Jesus comes up Pennsylvania Avenue, stops at the White House before going on to Congress. What do you think Jesus would have to say today? After all, to celebrate Palm Sunday is to remember the past, but only in order that it may impact the present, in order that we might be more faithful disciples of the one whose name we bear. And so, let's just imagine for a little bit: Jesus in Washington D.C.

All week long I could not help but think about Jesus and the United States and China in their standoff. What would Jesus say? What would Jesus counsel about how to end that standoff and to bring the people home and to move on? What do you think?

Well, as I was conscious of this all week, I have been conscious of my reactions. I was conscious of every television newscast, because the media shapes our opinions and whether it is our media or their media, let us not be naive here. I am not talking about Americans or Chinese; I am talking about human beings. And media does shape what we think.

I began to consider that international problem in terms of Hung and Elsie Liang, who are here this morning. I think if there was a vote on the loveliest, most gracious, loving, beautiful people in our community, Elsie and Hung Liang would

win, hands down. They're Chinese. Now I know they left China before the Red Plague, but they're Chinese. So I began to think about this international problem in terms of two concrete people, trying to personalize it rather than allowing the media to demonize the other side. Why would we fear this nation if it has people in it like Hung and Elsie? What do they really think over there, anyway?

I went to Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*. He is a Harvard expert in international affairs, and this book is highly respected. I remembered that he was saying that in the future, in our global situation, the conflict will be between civilizational groups; the West, the Orthodox, the Chinese, the Muslims, and so on. He has about nine of them. So I went back and I picked up the book again and looked at the little discussion on China. I found that in the late 1980s and 1990s, the relationship between the U.S. and China deteriorated. An inter-governmental document, a Chinese document, said, "We should point out that since becoming the sole superpower, the U.S. has been grasping wildly for a new hegemonism and power politics, and also that its strength is in relative decline and that there are limits to what it can do."

In 1995 the president of China spoke about Western hostility. "Western hostile forces have not for a moment abandoned their plot to westernize and to divide our country." Also in 1995 there was a broad consensus among Chinese scholars and leaders that the U.S. was trying to divide China territorially, subvert it politically, contain it strategically, and frustrate it economically. Samuel Huntington says, "... and there is good evidence for all of those claims."

So, might decent Chinese people in leadership be scared to death, or irritated at surveillance flights? Have they not a right to be concerned about our supposed negotiations with Taiwan about advanced weaponry? This is an international game and it is a dangerous game, and we're one of the players. In fact, I saw the young Chinese who were interviewed on the street, and who I think really are very open to America. So many of them want to come here and do come here. But they said the U.S. is such a bully; it throws its weight around. Another said, "Why can't the United States see us as a friend instead of a competitor? Why the hostility?"

I know the situation is complex. I know there are good people doing their best to end this standoff. I know I am naive and uninformed, but I also know that I am a human being with a moral intuitive sense, and some common sense, and I want to know why such a standoff has to be marked by such diplomatic duplicity on both sides, the demonizing of the other side.

Is it so difficult to say, "This whole world of which we are a part has a shadow side to it, and we play into it, and we are strategically trying to contain you because we're number one and any time you are number one, you are threatened to death about who is going to come on your tail"?

You can live in a gated community and you can get your security forces out, but when you are on top of the heap, you don't sleep well. Would it be so difficult to say to the Chinese, "We're in this thing together and it's not good, and we're sorry"? I suppose that is naive, but it is just a suggestion from a simple preacher, and I think the thing could be over.

Jesus in Washington. He might stop by the White House and he might say to President Bush, "Why did you just scrap the Kyoto Treaty?" A special in *Time* magazine dated April 9 says, "Except for nuclear war or a collision with an asteroid, no force has more potential to damage our planet's web of life than global warming. It's a serious issue, the White House admits, but nonetheless, George W. Bush has decided to abandon the 1997 Kyoto Treaty to combat climate change, an agreement the U.S. signed but the new President believes is fatally flawed. His dismissal last week of almost nine years of international negotiations sparked protests around the world and a face-to-face disagreement with German Chancellor Schroeder."

This special *Time* report studies this whole issue, and in the course of the discussion about global warming, says ten years ago the data was fuzzy. We had no hard proof of global warming. But at the present time, the data is pretty certain that there is such a phenomenon as global warming and that it will have deleterious effects unless it is curbed.

Why isn't anything done about it? This paragraph reveals the reasons:

Members of both major political parties recognize that global warming is a long-term problem that carries little short-term political risk. In other words, if in the year 2050, disaster strikes, it's not going to impact anybody presently in Congress. By the time their inaction causes big trouble, many decades from now, they will be long gone. But, if they foul up the economy, they will be sent home next election day.

When it comes to the environment in general, the president must answer charges that his campaign sales pitch was little more than bait and switch. Almost immediately upon taking office, the soothing candidate who made it a point to sound so many green themes on the stump began to govern much more like the oil patch president Conservatives hoped he would be."

That is from *Time* magazine. In the same issue, the Congress is detailed. Campaign financing: will it work, will it make any difference, will it do any good? The question is this: if the bill becomes law, will it truly disinfect our politics? The end of Clinton's presidency and the launch of Bush's were a parable for reformers, between the pardons for Democratic fat cats and the environmental policy clout of big business. But like a virus, political money has a way of mutating so that it spreads in any environment.

If Jesus came to Washington today, I suppose he might have something to say about this planet, this creation, and the fact that we are playing fast and loose and political people are bowing to the pressure of power and wealth and entrenched, established corporate leadership.

Corporate leadership. What would Jesus say about that?

Michael Harrington is kind of a gadfly, prophetic type, and he is a bit on the left, and yet he got attacked from the left. Now if you're attacked from the right and the left, you must be doing something right. He was worried about the growing collectivism of our economic systems. The Communist system, of course, is state planned collectivism, but it's not only the state that can plan the economy. He suggests that the trend under modern capitalism was toward a top-down command model, bureaucratic collectivism in which huge oligopolies administered prices, controlled the politics of investment, bought off the political system, and defined cultural taste and values while obtaining protection and support from the state. Harrington says it is not a good thing that under modern capitalism, effective control over investment, credit, and social planning is increasingly vested in the hands of un-elected elites who hold their own class interest and who valorize their own class-determined notions of the public good.

Then there is this Catholic nun—you always have to doubt Catholic nuns. They're usually bleeding heart liberals and they're very, very idealistic and of no practical good, really. But Joan Chittister is a rather thoughtful one who talks about the 25 largest multi-national corporations that have annual GNPs that exceed the annual GNP of the United States and Western Europe combined. She asks, concerned about the environment, "What is good for the company? What promotes profit? What enhances technology? Stirs us? Drives us, blinds us? Whatever it takes to double the dollar—the squalor of the people, the loss of the rainforest, the weight of the smog, the clogging of waterways and the appropriation of resources—we leave to the generations to follow with never even a grace to blush. It is patriarchy waged in mortal battle for power, profit, and personal supremacy. It is a global male game of ruthless proportions called having dominion and survival of the fittest."

Well, that's what you'd expect from such a source.

If Jesus came to Washington, or if he came to Wall Street, or if he came to the Church in Greece, an Orthodox country where one of the Greek clerics says there will be bloodshed if the pope comes to visit, don't you think Jesus might have something to say? So Church, corporate America, Congress, the presidency—I have enough in this sermon to offend everybody. If I didn't get your favorite, just stay tuned.

My point is this, dear friends. It was addressing these kinds of things that brought Jesus to violent death. If Jesus had died as a savior of the world for the

forgiveness of our sins and we could have pursued that in a personal piety, no one would care. If Jesus had simply said, "Look, I'm dying as a savior figure for sin, and Jerusalem, you can stay just as you are. Rome stay just as you are," he would not have been killed. He would have died in his bed.

But you see, on Palm Sunday he entered the city and confronted power with truth, prophetic truth, because he knew what we know, and that is that society becomes structured, develops structures. It needs them. We cannot live without social structures. We need political structures and economic structures; we need institutional forms. That is the only way we can operate with one another. A society needs order, it needs law, it needs custom. But what happens is that a society is organized like a pyramid, and over time, power comes to the top and that power is usually in terms of wealth. Wealth controls the political leaders, and what is bought and paid for is the maintenance of the status quo, which is good for business and which keeps everything on an even keel.

It was true in Jesus' day. Imperial Rome was an occupying power. The leaders of the Jewish people were collaborating for their own prestige and position and also trying to protect their holy place. Let us not fail to see that there was some genuine concern on the part of Caiaphas. But the system was wrong. There were people, masses of people who were being cast off their land, who didn't have enough to eat, who were poor and suffering. It was a domination system and Jesus knew that it was contrary to that covenant understanding from the Hebrew scriptures, the tradition that was his. He spoke in the name of that tradition. He spoke where it made a difference. And they killed him.

But the situation was not unique. That is the way it always is. It is true today. It is a pyramid, and our political system is bought and paid for. Campaign finance? My goodness, there are all kinds of senators who voted for it who really didn't want it, because how does it operate other than through money? Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, in his cynicism, tried to get an amendment passed which would make it unconstitutional so the courts could throw it away, and it is still not passed. It has to go to the House where it may be killed so it never comes to the floor, because our politicians don't want campaign finance, because that is the way they have gotten where they are. That is the system.

Would Jesus have anything to say about that? He'd have something to say about how we're dealing with the poor and the disenfranchised. He would have something to say about health care and he would have something to say about the fact that an inheritance tax is not a death tax, and probably if you have that much money, you don't have to keep it anyway. Jesus would follow the money and he would speak a word, and it is the way society always is organized. Sometimes a poet comes along and sees it and sings it, but you can ignore poets. You can ignore Joan Chittister; she's just a Catholic nun, a kind of a rebel. And then a prophet sees it and a prophet declares it and finds the problem. So you kill the prophet.

Do you think that Jesus didn't know what he was up against? This isn't a bad Palm Sunday text, either:

Woe you Pharisees, scribes, hypocrites, you leaders of the people, for you build tombs to the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous and you say, "If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in the shedding of the blood of the prophets." Thus you testify against yourself that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors. You snakes, you brood of vipers, how can you escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore, I send you prophets, sages and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, some of whom you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town so that upon you may come all the righteous bloodshed from Abel to the blood of Zechariah, Son of Berachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I tell you all this will come upon this generation. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it, how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not, and your house is left to you desolate.

I don't know who it would be, but somebody in Washington would see that this prophet, and this poet, would be done away with. It might be the Pentagon. Maybe the National Security Office. Maybe the Congress itself. It could be a conspiracy cooked up in Wall Street. Who knows. But somebody would do away with him in our world today. Because nothing has changed. There is still a concentration of wealth and power, prestige and position. The only difficulty with that is, when you get there, you really have to build gates high and engage security forces, because you are going to be looking over your shoulder, because you are not at ease. You cannot rest. It is like the U.S. seeing China coming on its tail.

I think that Jesus, when he said those words in Matthew which I just quoted, was angry. But ultimately, Jesus was not angry. It was anguish, because he was a son of Israel and he knew the Psalmist who said the war-horse is a vain hope for victory. The king is not saved by his army. Power finally will not do it. He knew Zechariah. He knew the vision of the prophets about the day that a peaceable king would come and do away with all the weapons of war. And if he had come into Washington today, he would have known one of the great crises of our world today, of the whole globe, is a question of global warming, and he would know about the concentration of wealth and power, and he would have to say something about it. He would probably say something about the pyramid shape of our society, and he would be worried about those lower layers.

Jesus wept. Anger begets anger. Hostility begets hostility. But compassion and anguish sometimes call people up short. Dear God, what a Palm Sunday it would

be if some of you movers and shakers, you who are the elite of the earth, would say, "What in the world can we do to follow Jesus?"

I began Lent by saying, "What's the matter with us?" I followed up with the question, "Do we need God to be good?" There is a little twist that is different this Palm Sunday, because in the light of where I have been moving, I thought one time that somehow or other that messianic dream of shalom would be affected by God coming in and making it all right. The more I think about it, the more I think God has said, "It's in your hands. What are you going to do about it? I have sent you my son. You have a paradigm; you have a model. You know. You know."

Jesus weeps while we procrastinate and our world is in jeopardy. That is really what Palm Sunday is all about. A people wanted a parade. Parades are good. Celebrations are exhilarating. But if Jesus walked into Washington today, he wouldn't have much more than a week to live. So, my question is: Will we ever learn?