

The Road Taken Makes All the Difference

From the series: Journeying on the Road Less Traveled

Scripture: Luke 4:1-13; John 12:12-28

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Palm Sunday, March 24, 2002

Transcription of the spoken sermon

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood and sorry I could not travel both," so said Robert Frost, for Robert Frost knew, contrary to the wisdom of Yogi Berra, that when you come to a fork in the road, you cannot just "take it" You have to choose. We have been following Jesus, journeying with Jesus this Lenten season on the road less traveled, and we come today to Jerusalem and the culmination of that way that he went, because the road that we choose makes all the difference.

The Gospel portraits of Jesus are very clear in presenting him as one who lived with intentionality, with a strong sense of identity, following consistently a vision that led him to Jerusalem and finally to crucifixion. So, this morning we find him approaching and entering that Holy City as the culmination of his ministry.

Jesus did not begin at this point to make those choices that led him to death, for the Gospels are clear that he had been one who had been choosing the road less traveled consistently throughout his ministry. Matthew, Mark and Luke all give us temptation narratives, Mark simply referring to it, Matthew giving a rather full account, and Luke the account that was read a moment ago.

The temptation story is not a historical event, not Jesus out on the wilderness for forty days coming back to say, "This is what happened." But Luke tells us in the opening verses of his gospel that he checked all the sources he could in order to get the fullest possible handle on this Jesus, on this tradition that had grown now for Luke some five decades after the event itself. When Luke wants to paint the portrait of Jesus, at the onset of that ministry, he records this mythical story of Jesus' encounter with the adversary, with Satan, because the temptations that Jesus faced throughout all his ministry were clearly temptations to use his considerable power - to make a stone into bread, serving himself and perhaps socially the needs of people, using his considerable power to manipulate the political system and by compromise and expediency gain worldly acclaim. Or, perhaps, charismatic that he was, using the religious community manipulatively, coercively, forcing belief through some dramatic action of one kind or another. These were not temptations that were there in the very beginning for Jesus, but

Jesus wrestled from the beginning with those very possibilities which were always open to him. Luke tells us that, once that encounter was over, the Devil left him for a more opportune time, indicating that Jesus was not yet done with the temptation to compromise that to which he was committed.

Jesus was intentional about who he was and what he was called to do. John's Gospel tells us that he started out as a disciple of John the Baptist, teaching and preaching around the Jordan. But things weren't going so well there, and he thought it best to move on and that probably represents more than just moving out of the territory. It probably represents his movement away from John the Baptist, the fiery preacher of the judgment of God, looking for the wrath of God to be poured out on that people. Jesus, becoming uneasy with that, finding for himself the model of the suffering servant in Isaiah, the model for his own person and his own ministry, moving up into Galilee in what is called the Galilean Spring, and Luke tells us in the paragraph following the temptation story about how Jesus delivered the prisoners and caused the deaf to hear and the blind to see. Jesus initiated a ministry that was the embodiment of the grace of God, bringing joy and inspiration and healing and liberation to people.

Then in the middle of Luke's Gospel, chapter nine, verse 51, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, and now we see him there. I had Bob read the account in Luke's Gospel, even though I had lifted John's account in the 12th chapter of John's Gospel. I was going to do John because I was going to point out that John is the only one who uses palms, and palms were a nationalistic symbol, and the people were receiving Jesus as a national hero, and they were ready for him to make some move to restore the dignity and the freedom of the nation. His mounting the donkey in John's Gospel was his own action to correct their misconception of what he was about and who he was. But with things in Jerusalem as they are as we speak, I simply had to go back to Luke's account for he comes into the city as the peaceable king. There aren't even any branches in Luke's account. Then he stands on the crest of Olivet and weeps over the city. "If only you had known, if only you had known the things that make for peace. You missed the moment of your visitation, and now it is hid from your eyes, and there will not be one stone left upon another."

Once again, nobody was there with a stenographer's notebook and nobody had their camera at the ready, but what Luke is telling us in placing Jesus there and putting those words in Jesus' mouth is that it was Jesus' way that led him to that point that would have looked over Jerusalem and would have seen the imminent devastation and ruination of that city and that people, for when Luke was writing his Gospel, this was not prophetic, this was not foreknowledge of what was about to happen. You didn't have to be a rocket scientist to know what was going to happen, as a matter of fact, but what Luke was doing five decades later was describing what actually happened, because in the Roman-Jewish War of 66 to 70, the whole city was finally brought to absolute and utter ruin, never again to be

that place of the Temple and the priesthood and the center of Jewish religious life.

And so, Jesus comes to Jerusalem on this day to bring his message finally to the very center and the heart of the leadership of this people, and he can see what is going to happen. I thought to myself, with what is happening in our world today, I can hardly not set that passage before you because it does say what I have been trying to say in these Lenten weeks, both on Sundays and on Wednesday nights, that is that there are two roads, that Jesus took the road less traveled, the way of God's inclusive grace and unconditional love and non-violence, and that way is the only hope of the world. Jesus, as he stands before Jerusalem, is holding out the only hope of the world, and that is to find the way of peace.

As we worship this morning, Jerusalem is burning, hostility, terrorism, violence and death is everywhere, and the situation there seems to be almost a carbon copy of that which was going on 2000 years ago, except today the ones who are desperate, the ones who would do the foolish thing of challenging overwhelming power are the Palestinian people, aren't they? What chance did the Jewish people in 66 to 70 have in the rebellion against Rome? Really none at all. It was an act of suicide. But, people can get that desperate so that it doesn't matter. When they have lost everything, then they do the desperate thing which has no hope at all of success, but which is the final sign of their utter frustration, anger, resentment, and hopelessness.

We have not visited anything in this Lenten season that we have not visited many times before. We probably have not taken up any themes that we have not reflected on together before, but somehow or other, in the wake of 9/11, it all comes so poignantly before us. It seems so fresh; it seems so contemporary. It seems like these events surrounding Jesus and Jerusalem are happening all over again in our world, and we see these ways that divide. There is business as usual, and business as usual has been the rule for the past 2000 years, for the way of Jesus has not been followed. Business as usual is real politics. Business as usual is the imposition of force to coerce the settlement. Business as usual is that politics that uses whatever force is necessary in order to maintain the status quo or to return things to the status quo, the use of force being necessary to accomplish that purpose. The imposition of force continues to be necessary in order to maintain that status quo. Nothing really changes with the imposition of force. Hearts are not changed, minds are not changed, behavior is not changed. Rather, it is coerced, and so there is a lock put on it and the maintenance of some measure of quietude, however that may be described.

The other way is the way of Jesus, the way of peace, which has not been tried. The way of peace which hasn't been tried, of course, sounds so Pollyanna. It sounds rather ridiculous, doesn't it? It sounds like preacher-talk. It is the kind of thing you expect to hear in church, but thank God when you get to Monday morning it is the real world, whether you are in the corporate rat race, or whether you are in

the military, or political assignment, or whatever it may be, because the real world out there doesn't take Jesus seriously.

And yet, you know, when you think about Jesus, in spite of all of the darkness into which we are entering right now, Jesus was not a tragic figure. Jesus was a person of great joy. Jesus was an inspiring personality. Jesus was noted for his table fellowship, the camaraderie of the meal. Jesus was a healer Jesus loved children. Jesus was a human being, Jesus lived a humane existence and created humanness about him. So, I grant you, it sounds silly to suggest in a world like ours, post-9/11, focused even now in the Middle East and in Jerusalem, to talk about the way of Jesus, doesn't it? And yet, when you stop and think about Jesus himself and who he was and what he embodied, has anyone in history impacted human behavior more? Has anyone made a difference in the world more than Jesus? And when someone did take him seriously like Gandhi, look what was effected. And in our own country, in the civil rights era of Martin Luther King, that way of non-violent resistance?

For 2000 years it has been business as usual, pretty much, and here we are. We could destroy ourselves, we really could. How much into a corner does Israel have to be shoved before they use nuclear capability? You might say they are smarter than that. What if it is existence or being driven into the sea? And what if, as some young Egyptian student suggested, that a suitcase-sized nuclear bomb could eliminate the problem of Israel? And what if that situation continues to escalate until it becomes a civilizational war which astute commentators are speaking of? We could bring this planet back to the Stone Age where the only thing that would be alive would be some moss on a rock somewhere.

Well, I suppose that sounds also like dramatic pulpit rhetoric, but it really isn't. Our world is really in crisis, and business as usual, *real politic*, the imposition of force, the exercise of power has brought us to the brink of disaster. So, Jesus the Pollyanna, Jesus the silly, unrealistic idealist - there he stands looking at Jerusalem and saying, "You missed your chance, and now it's hid from your eyes." That is the way it is with us. We can get to a point where we just can't see anymore, and then just awful things can happen.

So, Jesus -I don't know, Jesus, but I wonder if with the Internet, for example, if you could come back or somebody like you could get on the Internet, could begin to filter this around the world, could somehow or other grab the attention of the whole global community of people who essentially are people of good will, and take it out of the hands of the power brokers and let the people speak. I just wonder whether there aren't people, multitudes - I wonder if there isn't somebody somewhere that could embody again that which Jesus embodied, because the world is before a fork in the road: two ways, two roads diverge in the yellow wood, and we have to choose which one we will follow.