

“Praising Power”

April 1, 2007

Psalm 31:9-16; Luke 19:28-40

It probably won't come as a big shock to many of you that I was a tomboy as a kid, a very dedicated tomboy. I was fascinated with guns and knives and army-navy surplus stores – great preparation for ministry, don't you think? I loved pretending I was the good gunslinger who saved the day or the good pirate who acted as Robin Hood on the high seas. Seeing those marvelous pictures of Jim Metzger as a young boy yesterday afternoon (you were so cute, Jim!) reminded me of one of my favorite pictures from my childhood. In my picture, I'm about 5 or 6. I'm standing in a forest, wearing a cowboy hat, and around my hips, on gun belts, are not one but two handguns (fake, of course). I made a cute, non-lethal gunslinger.

That picture was taken in northern New Mexico, high in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The State of New Mexico calls itself the Land of Enchantment, and that particular part of the state is truly enchanted, with snow-covered peaks, rushing rivers, thick forests, and a geologic history that makes geologists swoon. The summers I spent in those mountains with my family, in the cabin my dad built with the help of my oldest brother, were priceless gifts, feeding my soul in ways that I'm still discovering.

There was a small tourist town just a few miles away from our cabin, but we had to drive to Taos regularly to stock up on the groceries that weren't available nearby. Although much of that journey was one of stunning beauty, the trip also included driving by an ever-expanding molybdenum mine, and that meant feeling deep grief and anger at the way the mine operation was chewing up the landscape and then spitting out the remains. Instead of the dramatic canyon walls, with their steep slopes and juniper and spruce trees, there were massive piles of gravel, the gravel that was left after the miners had extracted the molybdenum.

As a child and a young teenager, I hated that mine. (And, to tell you the truth, I probably still do.) It horrified me to see the landscape turned into something so lifeless. I was heartbroken and angry. I didn't know what I could do to stop that destruction, so I started to *imagine* doing something. Still very much the tomboy, I imagined getting a real gun, climbing to the top of the gravel heap, and preventing anyone from grinding up another inch of that beautiful canyon. I didn't want to hurt anyone, even in my imagination, but I did want to scare the mine owners and workers and to stop the mine.

In other words, I wanted *power*, and the only power I could imagine was the kind rooted in fear, intimidation, and, ultimately, violence. My limited imagination probably came in part from being a tomboy (gunfights and sword fights are violent, after all), in part from growing up in America, but mostly, I think, from being human. Across cultures, across continents, and across millennia, human beings have been seduced by the power of force, the power of coercion, the power of violence.

This is part of the larger, human context in which the week that begins today plays out. In the midst of personal, cultural, and human vulnerability to the allure of imperial power – the power of coercion, of force, of imposing one's own will on the life of another – we begin Holy Week with something very different: an act of humility. We begin with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a colt, a supposedly “lowly” beast of burden. Jesus enters Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, and the crowds of disciples praise God for the deeds of power that they have seen in Jesus and in his ministry. They cry out,

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

If we imagine this scene with our focus solely on Jesus and the crowds, we see people who have heard Jesus preach, who have seen him heal people in body and in spirit, and who have encountered God at work in and through him. If we understand Jesus’ welcome into Jerusalem in this way, we are understanding it accurately ... but also incompletely. There is more to this event, this scene, but the gospel writer couldn’t describe it directly. He – and the odds are very much that the writer was a “he” – didn’t make it more explicit, because the “more” was highly subversive. The “more” was a fundamental challenge to the power of the Roman Empire and its emperor ... and a wise subversive character will always be very subtle in the early stages of a challenge to the coercive, imperial power of his or her age.

So what *is* the “more” that’s missing? What Luke and the other gospels don’t tell us, but what most of the earliest Christians would have known without being told, is that within days of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on a colt, with the crowds cheering and praising the God of Israel, Pontius Pilate would also have entered Jerusalem. Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, came to Jerusalem each year during Passover. As Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan describe the scene in their recent book, Pilate came with a show of force, to prevent or quell the beginnings of any Jewish uprising during Passover, a time when thousands of Jews made the trip into the Holy City. Pilate knew from experience that many of those thousands longed to force the Romans out of Jerusalem and out of their lives, so he came to Jerusalem to make a point, a military point of power.

So what the gospel writers don’t tell us is that Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, which we celebrate today, was in utter contrast to Pilate’s entry into the city. It was in direct *opposition* to Pilate’s arrival.

Jesus and his disciples came in from the east, from the Mount of Olives. Pilate would have entered from the west, having traveled from the city of Caesarea, a newly built monument to the power and might of the emperor Caesar. Jesus came into Jerusalem riding a colt, accompanied by his disciples; Pilate would have come in on a war horse, accompanied by armed Roman soldiers. The crowds that welcomed Jesus cried out with praises to *God* and a word of blessing and peace. The crowds that welcomed Pilate into Jerusalem would have shouted their praises to *Caesar*. And the Caesar they would have praised was a man who claimed to be God and who understood “peace” as something that came at the end of the sword and in the shadow of thousands of crucifixions.

So Jesus from the east and Pilate from the west are on a collision course in Jerusalem. By this week’s end, they will collide, and it will seem on Friday that the power of violence has vanquished the power of love. But even as the week unfolds and as betrayal, denial, abandonment, and violence threaten to crush Jesus’ heart and life, Jesus will remain a man of peace, a man of love, and a man of forgiveness.

This week will end on what is known as “Holy Saturday,” the day after Jesus hangs on a cross and dies with words of both agony and forgiveness on his lips. This week will end *before* Easter morning. This week *must* end before Easter morning, if Easter is to have any meaning at all. The week must end with the agonizing question gripping our own hearts, “Is the power of God – the loving, healing God we see through Jesus’ life and ministry – greater than the power of the Caesar of our day, the Caesar that wields the swords of violence, economic exploitation, and arrogance?” Or are the powers

that destroy and diminish the lives of our brothers and sisters throughout creation greater than the power and beauty of life itself?

The week also presents us with this question: Can we have the courage and the faith to trust the power of love, even in the midst of – *especially* in the midst of – the power of death – death of the body, mind, and soul? Can we? Do we? Will we?

I'd like to end this morning with a story from the life of a man named Mel White, the Rev. Dr. Mel White. In many ways, his story is the story of Holy Week, a story that ends with only glimpses of Easter morning.

Mel White was for many years deeply involved in the rise of the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition. He was a confidante and close friend of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson as they both worked to build a political movement that claimed to speak for Christianity and for God. But over time, as the result of his own personal struggles and spiritual growth, he realized he had to leave that movement.

Over the last 20 years, Mel White has felt called by God into the vocation of listening to and reading what his former colleagues, Falwell and Robertson and others, are saying, so that we can all hear the hate and destructive intolerance in their messages. Their messages have long targeted gay men and lesbians, but they have also, in the last several years, begun to target Muslims.

When Mel was in Sonoma a few months ago, he spoke at Reader's Books and read from his latest book. During his presentation, he read passages from early Nazi propaganda, and he read passages from the writings and sermons of the leaders of the Religious Right. But as he read, he omitted the text's references to Jews, lesbians and gays, and Muslims. And because he omitted those references, we couldn't tell whether he was reading something from Nazi Germany or something from the "Religious" Right. The texts all described the hated group as vermin, viruses, germs, and filth. The texts all denied the very humanity of groups of human beings.

Those of us who had gone to hear Mel speak about his book and his experiences sat there, stunned and horrified. After a time, someone asked, "This is horrible; it's so destructive. But what can we do?" Mel drew on his knowledge of how the voices of hate had organized and gained political power, and he answered the question with very practical advice about organizing, using the media, raising funds, and being political active. But he also talked about having officiated at the funeral of a friend the week before. His friend, a gay man, had killed himself and in his suicide note had simply said, "I can't take the hate anymore." And so, after talking about all the *practical* things we could and should do, Mel White stood before us with tears in his eyes and said, "But what we really have to do is out-love them. *That's* what we have to do. We *have* to out-love them."

My beloved friends, the story of Holy Week is the story of a God who out-loses everything and everyone. It is the story of forgiveness in the face of persecution, of compassion in the face of ridicule and violence. It is the story of a God who can out-love all the forces of destruction, death, and hatred. It is the story of a God who creates us in love, with love, and through love. And, my sisters and brothers, it is the story of a God calls us to join in the healing, holy work of love in all that we do. Let us join one another in living out that story, here, now, and always.

Amen.

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