**Telling our Jesus Story**

A homily by The Rev. Chris Wendell

For Palm Sunday, April 11, 2022

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

I am always moved each year on Palm Sunday when we hear the story of Jesus’ final days on this earth brought to life by members of our parish. I keep a list of who has read what part, and during the last decade, over 50 of you have participated in this ministry at least once. I don’t coach anyone on how to read the various lines, which, more or less, are direct translations from the Bible. And so, when we hear this story each year, it is told with the cadences, tones of voice, accents, and pacing that are unique to our community. In fact, if you’ve been around St. Paul’s for awhile now, and I asked you to close your eyes and listen to the Passion without knowing who is reading which part, I would imagine at least some of you could guess who was up there just from the uniqueness of the voices. It’s Jesus’ story…but it’s told in your voice, in only the way that you can tell it.

“How do *you* tell the story of Jesus?” As we begin this Holy Week together, I want to ask you to think about that a little. “How do you tell the story of Jesus?” To yourself, to your children or grandchildren, if you have them. To those who ask you “why are you Christian?”. There are many ways to be a Christian, but despite the diversity of the various Christian communities and denominations around the world, at its core, each one is a community that tells stories about Jesus. Perhaps the only faith practice that cuts across every part of the Christian family is that: telling the story of Jesus, in the unique way that only they can. So what does Jesus’ story sound like in your voice?

It’s an important question because they don’t all sound the same. Not every part of the Christian family tells the story of Jesus in the same way. Every time we hear Jesus’ story, different moments are emphasized (or left out); particular themes emerge (or are ignored); specific implications for how we should live as Jesus’ friends are highlighted (or discarded). Because of this, it’s important for each of us to know what our own Jesus story sounds like. Whether you tell your Jesus story in a scholarly voice, a mystical voice, a devotional voice, or even a skeptical voice, as a Christian, we all have a Jesus story to tell. What does yours sounds like at this point in your life?

Perhaps this seems like an overwhelming question for you, though I hope it doesn’t. The good news is we don’t have to work out our answer alone. The Gospels, for one, are here to help us. Even though they tell four different stories of Jesus and his life, death and rising, taken together they give us some guardrails for helping us understand who the historical person of Jesus was, and how the early generations of his followers understood him in diverse ways. Our Jesus story begins there. So too, we have each other. Our Jesus story is shaped by who we choose to worship with, to fellowhship with, to be in Christian community with. By grandmothers who first brought us to church, and grandchildren whom we hope to share just one special thing about Jesus with when the moment is right. We have clergy, who, on our better days, offer wisdom and council as you continue to revise and refine your own telling of Jesus’ story. And we have the gift of reason that God has given each one us to use to better apprehend the truth based on our life experiences.

Now any one of these things can let us down sometimes, and we can go a little off the rails. But all of these together – the Bible, each other, the clergy, our reason -- help us be sure that we’re actually telling Jesus’ story using our voice, rather than our story using Jesus’ voice. Turns out there’s a pretty big difference between those things. When I was driving across the country last August to start my sabbatical, I can’t tell you how many yard signs I saw that encouraged me to hate someone in Jesus’ name. It was a lot. But it didn’t shake my faith in God, because I knew that they were telling their story in Jesus’ voice, rather than his story in their voice. For the story that ends with the cry “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” can never be a story of hate. Only love. So when hatred comes cloaked in the voice of Jesus, we can always be sure that it’s really someone else’s story. Even if that someone else is pastor, or a priest, or a patriarch.

Seeing those yard signs of others’ hate dressed up in the voice of Jesus may not have shaken my faith in God, but it does shake my faith in people. We live in a time where there is a lot of hatred out there. A lot of animosity. A lot of discontent looking for a champion to help focus the rage, or failing that, a target. In a way, Palm Sunday could have been one such moment. A bunch of colonized religious minorities who watch as, yet again, the powerful armies of the Empire come into their holy city in their sacred season. People see Jesus’ procession entering from the other side and think a revolution is coming, and they shout Hosanna. Save us. Free us. Their frustration at their mistreatment is ready to break forth into insurrection. But Jesus resists this. He attempts to redirect them. He chooses the donkey instead of the colt. He chooses peace instead of war. He tells those ready to take up arms in his defense “no more of this.” Jesus refuses to let his story be a story of violence.

But the violent impulses persist. And the tragedy of Holy Week is in what happens next. Others see an opportunity. They swoop in to capitalize on the rage of the crowd for their own purposes. Rather than diffuse the crowds’ agitating impulse, as Jesus tried to do, they co-opt it. The temple leaders. The colonial governors. We call them authorities or leaders or rulers – but they don’t lead, they manipulate. The only rule they follow is the law of self-preservation. And in just a week’s time, they’ve put their insecurity and ambition into the voice of the Crowd. And now the Crowd’s Jesus’ story is no longer, “Save us, Jesus,” but rather, “If Jesus won’t be our insurrectionist, then we’ll take Barabbas, please.”

How sad a Jesus story that is. And if it were only confined to a moment in history 2,000 years ago, we could call it sad and misguided and leave it at that. But we know how willing faithful people are, again and again through history, to turn away from Jesus’ story when he won’t be their insurrectionist, and to follow whatever Barabbas might be there instead. Even in our own time.

So how *we* tell the story of Jesus matters, a lot. Both to our own spiritual health, and to the health of the world. So I ask you, “What does the story of Jesus sound like in your voice?” How would you describe it in a sentence or two? Is it the story about a God so angry and violent towards us that he sent his son to be sacrificed to assuage his rage? No. Sadly that’s one told far too often. But it’s a human story wrapped up in Jesus’ voice.

I can’t tell you what Jesus’ story sounds like in your voice. But here’s what it sounds like in mine. Jesus came into the world to reveal God’s ancient dream for humanity, to show us the dangers of giving in to violence, the necessity of inclusive community, and the potential that compassionate self-giving holds for human freedom. People who met Jesus loved this in theory, but few were able to commit themselves to living these ideals, except for some poor fisherfolk and their friends. Even they struggled. A lot. But Jesus never gave up, either on them or on God’s dream. He kept living that dream, until the faithful couldn’t abide it, the powerful wouldn’t allow it, and his friend just couldn’t do it anymore. Jesus didn’t have to die. We didn’t have to kill him. But we did. Though even then, God wouldn’t give up on us.

That’s a long Jesus story. More than a sentence or two. Perhaps yours is shorter, more to the point. Perhaps your Jesus story is simple like the centurion’s, “Truly this man was the Son of God.” Or personal like the Second Criminal, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Or even conflicted like Peter, his best friend, saying, “I do not know the man.”

Whatever Jesus’ story sounds like in your voice today, remember that it is a gift from God. Don’t judge it. Own it. Accept it as your unique way of giving voice to the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Carry it with you as you walk through Holy Week this year: as you wash feet, as walk the labyrinth, as you gaze at the cross, as you are warmed by the first. Who knows how the One who transformed a Crowd’s Jesus story from Hosanna, to Crucify, to Alleluia, might yet tune your lips to sing God’s praise. Amen.