

“The Question and a Story”
Luke 20:9-19/Isaiah 50:4-9a
FPC/March 28, 2010 (Palm/Passion Sunday)
By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Introduction

The church youth leader at a Jr. High retreat was feeling that everything was a little too plastic.....a little too “church-y”.....a little too “Jesus this and Jesus that,” so he began a morning discussion with the 12, 13 and 14 year olds with a simple question: “What is gray, has a busy tail, and eats nuts?” To his surprise the group was silent. As he looked around he saw confused looks on faces. “Come on,” he said. “This is easy. What is gray, has a busy tail, and eats nuts?” The group was still silent. Finally a girl in the group tentatively raised her hand, and said, “Well, it sounds like a squirrel.....
.....but I’ll say Jesus.”

We can all fall into that trap, and sometimes do; giving what we hope is the right answer to something we’re not so sure about. But what do we really believe? And more specifically, what do we really believe about Jesus? Who is Jesus? An end-time prophet who in word and act proclaimed the coming final reign of God? Who is Jesus? A gifted teacher and preacher who broke open new understandings about God and faith? Who is Jesus? A healer who had power to heal the sick, deaf and blind, and raise the dead? Who is Jesus? A popular social revolutionary who lived radical love, gathered the lost, and died on a cross for love? Who is Jesus? What do you think? Or more importantly, what do you believe? Who is Jesus? It’s the Christian question..... and a good question to ask on this Palm Sunday as we begin Holy Week.

II. Text

Who is Jesus? It was the question on the minds of the religious leaders in Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. As countless pilgrims made their way up to Jerusalem for Passover, Jesus came to the city riding on a donkey, a symbolic act of a king of peace. Immediately the crowd lined the road and began to lay their coats and palm branches down on it. Together they proclaimed him king, Savior, Messiah. The religious leaders there told Jesus to silence the people, as such things could only be said about the anointed one of God, the Christ. But Jesus would not. Who is Jesus?

Jesus then came to the Temple and upset the business of people exchanging money and buying sacrifices. Jesus and his followers did more than turnover a couple tables. Rather they took over the 35 acre Temple complex, and for that afternoon stopped sacrifice and normal Temple activity. The Temple was the center of Jewish religious and political power.....the place of priests, power and politics. Jesus’ actions

were a direct confrontation with those powers. And those dark powers began to make plans to kill Jesus. Who is Jesus?

The following day Jesus returns to the Temple with a crowd around him, and the religious powers are ready for him. “By what authority do you do these things?” they demanded. “Who do you think you are?” Jesus does not answer the question directly. But turning back to the crowd around him he tells a story. And he tells it loud enough for the religious powers to overhear.

Read Luke 20:9-19.

III. Exegesis

By what authority does Jesus disrupt the normal life of the Temple in the busiest time of the year? Who does he think he is? The answer comes in a story.

The story is clearly understood by those in the Temple that day. The vineyard is a gift from God to Israel. It is the covenant with God, a promise of faithfulness between God and Israel, and through it God will bless Israel and all creation. But the covenant becomes corrupted by religious leaders. They come to believe it is about special privilege, and not special responsibility. They come to believe it is all about them, and not God’s plans of redemption for the world. Prophets are sent, servants of God, who are to call Israel back to the truth of their role in God’s plans for salvation. God, the Lord of the vineyard, hopes honor and respect will be shown these servants. But the rebellion begins, and each of the servants is increasingly abused. The tenants will have nothing to do with the plans of the vineyard’s Lord (as the religious leaders will have nothing to do with God’s plans of redemption for the world).

So what should the Lord do? This is the key point in the story. The dramatic point is not at the end of the story, as we might expect. Rather it’s right here in the middle. The Lord of the vineyard has every right to send the authorities to his vineyard, arrest the violent tenants who have abused his servants, and have them brought to justice. They have dishonored the Lord. He has every right to demand just punishment. But this Lord makes another choice. In grace and nobility he will send his son. The Lord of the vineyard will take the risk that his son will be respected. And in sending the son the Lord is also offering forgiveness for past offences. The power of the Lord will not be in violence, but in grace.....not in an army, but in the vulnerability of the son. Such is the grace of God in Jesus.

The tenants, however, have other ideas. There is no honor or respect left. They instead act with rebellion and corruption. They want the vineyard for themselves. They

want the covenant with God to serve their own purposes. So the son is cast out of the vineyard and killed. The tenants believe that the inheritance, the vineyard, the plan of God for the redemption of the world is now theirs. It's the ultimate "it's all about me."

But the reign of evil does not last. Justice does come. The tenants, the religious leaders of Israel will be swept away, and the vineyard given to others. The promises of God for the redemption of the world will go to others more faithful.

The religious leaders in the Temple have been listening to the story, and following every word. They know they are the tenants in the story. "God forbid that such a thing should happen" they say. They like their positions and power. They like the vineyard as their own. They can't imagine it another way.

But "so it shall be" Jesus announces. The stone rejected by them will become the chief cornerstone in the new kingdom that God is building. And they will be on the outside. The religious powers wanted to lay hands this story teller, but they could not because of the crowd.....not yet anyway.

IV. Reflection

Who is Jesus? He is the servant of God spoken of in Isaiah 50, read earlier, who will suffer in the hands of faithless people, and trust his vindication to God.

Who is Jesus? He is the Son of the Lord of the vineyard, who incarnates the grace, vulnerability and honor of God.

Who is Jesus? He is the rejected stone, who will become the key part in the plan of God for the redemption of the world.

Who is Jesus? A friend from high school asked me that 25 years ago. Like me she had grown up in the church, and was now asking real questions about understanding and belief. Who is Jesus? I shared from theology and logic. For more than an hour we talked over dinner. She had questions. I thought I had answers. But as we went our separate ways after dinner, Lyn still had questions, and I had answers that really didn't answer her questions.

Looking back now I realize that that was one of those "I wish I knew then what I know now experiences." Now I know that real questions about Jesus are not answered by formulas or proofs. Those questions are not answered by logic and arguments. Jesus is not a math equation. Rather, now I know that answers are shared in stories.

Who is Jesus? Let me tell you the story about the Lord of a vineyard, and the Lord's Son.

Who is Jesus? Let me tell you the stories about Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Who is Jesus? Let me tell you the stories of the first Christians with the risen Jesus Christ. That's what the New Testament is about.

Who is Jesus? Listen to the stories about Jesus in hymns and songs, prayer and silence, caring for each and beauty.

Who is Jesus? Last week we heard stories from members of our congregation: A story from a mentor in our AfterSchool program coming to know Jesus in acts of care and prayer with a teenager whose heart was broken; Another story about coming to know Jesus through the beauty of music and the community of our choir; And another story about serving Jesus in the hungry people at the Prince of Peace soup kitchen in Farrell. Notice it's not proofs, or arguments, or deep theology.....but stories, our stories with Jesus.

Who is Jesus?

I could tell you a story about being overwhelmed when I was 5 years old with the presence and wonder of God in the little Presbyterian Church in Davenport, Washington when the congregation sang "Holy, Holy, Holy." Five years old, and in Davenport, Washington....I have no explanation....only the story.

I could tell you a story about my friend Walt. For 30 years this wife went to church, and prayed every day that Walt would join her. "You and the boys go," he said. "I'm not interested." But then Walt fought a battle with cancer, and the church prayed for Walt, and sent cards.....sent over 100 cards even when he had never come to church. In the prayer and caring, Walt came to recognize Christ, who had been waiting for him for 30 years. It's been over 25 years now since that time, and Walt still has all the cards. They're kept in a shoe box. He looks at them every once in a while. They're reminders of Jesus' care for him....his own story.

And I remember the story I've told you before. It's a story about Jesus for those who extend God's love in nursing homes.....and for those who have parents in nursing homes.....and for those who look for Jesus and some great hope in nursing homes. The story comes from preacher, writer and professor, Barbara Brown Taylor.

"One of the hardest things I do is to celebrate communion at a local nursing home on the poor side of town, where most residents spend their days strapped in a wheelchairs against the walls of the television room. Once a month, nurses roll ten or

fifteen of them into the sun room and park them in a semicircle around a small table. Some of them complain as I prepare the elements; "Get me out of here! Take me back to my room right now!" Others doze or stare or drool. Few stay awake through the whole twenty-minute service. When it is time for them to take communion I go from chair to chair, patting them awake and asking them if they want the bread and wine. About half let me press the elements into their lips; the rest refuse to be roused or else they look at me as if I am a burglar. It is one of the hardest things I do because I sometimes doubt the power of the sacrament to break through their fog. I say all the comfortable words and wonder if anyone hears them. I stand there with my arms raised over the bread and wine and suspect that I might as well be flying a kite.

The last time I went was late on Monday afternoon. One of the volunteers warned me that everyone's medication was wearing off, which was a mixed blessing. My congregation were more awake than usual, but they were also more vocal. I could hardly make myself heard over the din in the room. One woman sang, "Row, row, row your boat" throughout the beginning of the service, bouncing so hard against her restraints that her chair lurched toward me as I read the opening prayers. In a bid for attention, I clapped my hands and asked them to choose the gospel lesson for the day.

'What shall I read from the Bible this afternoon?' I asked them. 'What part would you like to hear?' The commotion lessened long enough for one old woman's broken voice to be heard above it.

'Tell us the resurrection story,' she said. I never saw who it was, but as her words settled down over the room the movers and shakers held still for a moment and the sleepers opened their eyes.

'Yes,' someone else said, and then some else. 'Yes. Tell us the resurrection story.'"

(Barbara Brown Taylor, The Preaching Life, pp. 64-65)

Stories about Jesus; stories that help us live, stories that help us die, and stories that help us believe we will live again. And as the stories are told, the fog lifts.....the fog lifts for a moment, and we know who Jesus is.