

Ute Molitor; First Congregational UCC in Camden; Palm Sunday 2019

The following story, involving an U.S. Navy ship off the coast of Newfoundland, was cited in a Montreal newspaper. I imagine that the events took place in a dense fog:

The Navy ship noticed an object in its path on the radar and sent out the following message: "Please divert your course 15 degrees to avert a collision!" "Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees," came the reply. The Navy captain responded more forcefully: "This is the captain of a U.S. Navy ship. I say again: Divert your course." "No, I say again: Divert YOUR course," was the answer. "This is an aircraft carrier of the United States Navy. We are a large warship. Divert your course at once!" the Captain insisted. "This is a lighthouse. Your call!"¹

I guess we can all imagine what the captain of that aircraft carrier did in a hurry – adjust course. Thank God for lighthouses! They are there to save us from crashing ourselves on the shores of life. Beyond an actual physical shipwreck, we can also think of this in terms of other kinds of proverbial storms or fog in our lives that is throwing us off course, when the seas of life get rough and unpredictable. Some storms come out of left field – an illness that turns our lives upside down. For some it may even lead to the loss of a job, then the loss of housing and an immersion into a cycle of poverty that is hard to escape. Some storms brew amidst years of neglect. Perhaps our marriage is coming apart after too many years of taking each other for granted or not counting the cost of blaming and stonewalling. Some storms or fog emerge from factions fighting each other or people abusing power. Scores of innocent people suffer, many among them are now displaced as refugees around the world. We are literally seeing more and more violent storms because of our collective impact on climate change. The economic crash of 2008 is an example of how letting arrogance, greed and the reliance on fallible measures can lead to disaster.

Events are about to come to a head in our Palm Sunday Gospel story as well, both in expected and unexpected ways. We hear of Jesus' preparation to formally and symbolically enter the city of Jerusalem, home of Jewish kings and the place of the yearned for Messiah (which means

¹ This story was listed on the Homileticonline resource site.

“the anointed one” - see more on this in last weeks’ sermon). The events we witness are partially styled after the 6th century B.C.E. prophet Zechariah who described the future entry of the Messiah in this way: *“Look your king is approaching, he is vindicated and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will banish chariots from Ephraim and horses from Jerusalem; the bow of war will be banished. He will proclaim peace to the nations, his empire will stretch from sea to sea, from the River to the limits of the earth (9:9-10).”*

Zechariah was speaking to Jews in his own time who had just returned from exile in Babylon. He believed that a new ruler would be sent by God once the people rebuilt the destroyed temple in Jerusalem. Many nations would flock to Jerusalem and be united under a realm of peace. The quality of this peace is in part symbolized by the humble donkey who is as different from a valiant warhorse of a warrior as you can imagine. Jesus enters the city on such a colt of a donkey. Donkeys were service animals, beasts of burdens. The colt is the most innocent and vulnerable embodiment of such service. In our story, animal and rider are a perfect match.

Jesus also enters the city symbolically as the Messiah at the time of Passover festival, the annual remembrance and celebration of God’s saving act of delivering the Jewish people leadership from slavery in Egypt. New Testament theologian, J.D. Crossan, suggests that the Roman Governor Pilate was probably also entering the city at this time from another gate to represent the Roman ruling power during this volatile time. It was a way of reminding the people who was truly in charge regardless of the theme of their festival. Pilate actually preferred his seaside resort of Caesarea that had been built by Herod to earn favor with Rome. However, Pilate had to come to this city at times like these. He would enter the city surrounded by soldiers, likely riding in on an impressive war horse.

Can you picture the contrast of these two worlds meeting each other in this volatile place and time? Two worlds are about to collide. And the world of the Jewish religious establishment will collaborate with the Romans to oppose Jesus. Remember that pilgrims who are in town for Passover are also flocking to the temple to offer their sacrifices to God in accordance with a highly structured and controlled system of sacrifice under the watchful control of the Jewish priests. Jesus has been opposing this system, preaching that God’s love is inclusive, accessible,

and transformative outside of the tightly held sacrificial system of the temple. On this same day of entering Jerusalem, Luke describes how Jesus enters and cleanses the temple as his next symbolic act (19:45-48). This will not be tolerated. Jesus is heading for trouble.

Knowing this, a part of me wants to shout out to Jesus today, “Save yourself! Turn around, divert your course, Jesus! You are about to crash!” We know from the story that the shouts of Hosanna which we raise in our songs today will be drowned out by demands to crucify Jesus before the week is done. That is also why Christians traditionally burn the psalms we wave on this day to prepare the ashes for Ash Wednesday when we acknowledge our collective failure to truly follow Christ. When people call out Hosanna, they are literally shouting, “Save us!” Curiously, the Gospel of Luke does not include the word “Hosanna” in the rendering of this story though Mark and Matthew do. Here the crowd just calls out “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” I suspect we need to hear that as focus by Luke on a direct challenge of naming Jesus as the true ruler in contrast to the powers that be.

“Save yourself, Jesus. Turn away, Jesus, adjust your course!” we may want to say to Jesus. We know the story. He will be abandoned by his disciples, arrested and tortured. The hailed Messiah will be executed as a non-violent trouble-maker and blasphemer. He will look to some like just another wannabe naïve Messiah gone mad. He will seemingly crash on the shores of the occupying Roman Empire and the established, crippled, but feisty, religious regime of his own people. They gave him warning along the way that he would not heed. “Save yourself, Jesus. Turn away, Jesus, adjust your course!”

But Jesus will not and cannot do that. The ancient hymn from Philippians reminds us that Jesus as the Christ has “emptied” himself to become human and to serve creation. He is a servant of love and peace who will take that love to its utmost expression of even loving his enemies to the point of death. We need to ask: who is really the lighthouse and who is the ship about to crash here?² From God’s perspective, Palm Sunday brings us to a point where all that opposes

² On Maundy Thursday, when Jesus gave the new commandment to love each other beyond bounds, we will also remember that he went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray: “Abba (Daddy), take this cup away from me. But not what I want, what you want be done.” It seems that there is a part of Jesus that knows only too well what the challenge of Palm Sunday will yield.

the vision of God's KINdom, and the one who inaugurates it, is about to be exposed for what it really is. God has sent out messenger after messenger to ask us to change course while we have ploughed ahead, too often in the wrong direction. Now God comes into the picture as Christ who in some ways acts like a lighthouse to us. Lighthouses don't just keep us from crashing into rocky points. They are meant to show us the way home into the safety of the harbor of true belonging and true freedom in Christ. What are we to do?

I would like to draw attention to the person who offers the colt so that Jesus can enact his entry as a vulnerable king of peace. When Jesus sends two disciples ahead of him to get the colt, he instructs them with what to say when the person asks them why they are taking it. They are to say, "The Lord/Christ has need of it." It is amazing that these words prove to be sufficient. In faith, this person releases his prized colt. "The Lord/Christ has need of it." That is enough and these words can be instructive to us. If "the Lord/Christ? Has need of it, it the work we have to do and it is that which we have to be free to give of ourselves. We, too, are in a way asked to "empty ourselves" in order to be able to serve.

Such emptying includes letting go of the illusion that anything outside of the love of God has the power to define who and whose we are. We are not our possessions, our degrees. We are also not our illness, our poverty, our addiction, our fear, our accomplishments, our bank accounts, our national identity, etc. We experience them but they do not ultimately define us. All that we are is the result of God constantly giving of Godself to bring us into being and sustain us second to second. We are closer to God than our breath. We belong more to each other than we have ever dared to imagine. The more we ask, "What does the Lord/Christ need" and remember that Christ asks us to believe that we meet him in each other and in the wider creation (notice how Christ says that even the stones will shout out – Luke 19:40), the less we are likely to crash on the shores of life. The more we are also likely to find our way into the harbor of mutual belonging.

Today, we are invited to foster this belonging through *One Great Hour of Sharing* which will benefit people in disaster areas around the globe. Our funds will provide real presence and aid

on the ground in places like Mozambique where flooding has wiped out villages, or places like Oebaki in Indonesia where drought has wiped out harvests, causing malnutrition and disease. It helps refugees around the world who need shelter, food, and education for the children. When we contribute to these efforts, we are being told, "The Lord/Christ has need of this." May we, too, respond in faith and generosity to serve God's vision of peace and plenty in our world. God will not stop caring and serving regardless of the perceived danger. May the Holy Spirit continue to convert our hearts and minds that we may find our collective and individual ways back into God's harbor of love and belong. "The Lord/Christ has need of this" for our sake.

All thanks and praise be to God.