

March 16, 2008
Passion Sunday

Pastor Russell Lackey
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John 12:17-26

Jump into the Ashes

Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. **18**Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. **19**So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!" **20**Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. **21**They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." **22**Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. **23**Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. **24**I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. **25**The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. **26**Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

Today is Palm Sunday, a day to wave palm branches and shout, "Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the king of Israel. Hosanna!"

Today is also a day filled with contradictions. First, we have Jesus riding on a donkey. As king, you would think he would ride a noble steed. Instead, Jesus, who owns everything, must borrow a donkey. Second, we have the crowd. On this day they shouted, "Hosanna!" A few days later they would shout "Crucify!" Third, the religious leaders should be the first to accept him. Instead they plot his death. Finally, we have Jesus' words that speak of him being glorified (lifted up) by being cast down into the ground. As celebratory as today is, it is also filled with contradiction.

To help understand the contradictions of Palm Sunday, I want to share with you an illustration. How many of you are familiar with the Mann Gulch fire of 1949? On August 5, 1949, a crew of fifteen of the United States Forest Service's elite airborne firefighters, the Smokejumpers, stepped into the sky above a remote forest fire in the Montana wilderness. Less than an hour after their jump, all but three of these men were dead.

What is amazing about this story is how one of the three survived. Two of the men were ahead of the others and were able to escape into a cave. But the foreman was with the rest of the men as the fire came upon them. Knowing that he could not outrun the fire Wag Dodge, the crew foreman, lit a fire and commanded his men to jump into the ashes so that the main fire would quickly pass over them and not burn them.

You have to understand, this was not protocol. No one had ever done anything like this before. With no other options, Dodge came up with the idea and ordered the men to jump into the ashes.

How do you think the men reacted? Not a single man entered the ashes. In fact, Dodge described what happened after giving the order by saying, "I heard someone say, 'To hell with that, I'm getting out of here!'" Dodge goes on to say, "For all my hollering, I could not direct anyone into the burned area... and within seconds after the last man had passed me, the main fire hit the area I was in" (Norman Maclean, *Young Men and Fire*, University of Chicago Press, p. 99).

Why didn't the men jump in? Maybe they didn't hear the order. Maybe the idea was ridiculous. Maybe as young men who were the elite of the elite they thought they could outrun the fire. Whatever the reason, they did not jump into the ashes and thus lost their lives.

I share this with you because that is exactly what Jesus was saying in our passage today. To get a context of the day you have to understand that it was the Sunday before Passover. According to Josephus, Jerusalem would have had nearly one million people flocking to the city for the festival. Because Jesus had earlier raised Lazarus from the dead, many people were flocking to Jesus. In fact, so many people came that the Pharisees said, "Look how the whole world has gone after him!" (12:19).

There is a funny thing that happens when you get a crowd of people gathered together, namely, there is a temptation to get carried away. Have you ever been to a synod assembly? You get a bunch of Lutherans together drinking coffee and eating cookies and suddenly all hell breaks loose. Pastors, who would otherwise say nothing, get embolden by the mixture of caffeine and sugar and make all kinds of comments. I do this as well. It is terrible.

It would have been tempting for Jesus to get carried away with the crowd. You would have. I would have. But Jesus did not. Instead, Jesus says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. **24**I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. **25**The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. **26**Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be" (12:23-26).

Talk about anticlimactic. As the crowd is surging to crown Jesus king, he responds by saying that he will be glorified (lifted up) by being the seed that is cast into the ground and dies. And then he invites his followers to join him. Jump into the ashes.

Could you imagine one of our politicians giving a speech like this? It would not work. It did not work in Jesus' day either. Not because the people did not understand these words about a seed. Rather, they had a different idea about God's seed. You have to remember that Israel had been waiting a very long time for the chosen seed. God promised a seed to Eve that would crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). God promised a seed to Abraham that would bless all nations (Genesis 22:18). God promised a seed to David that would endure forever. Psalm 89:34 tells us, "My covenant I will not break, Nor alter the word that has gone out of My lips. Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David: His seed shall endure forever" (Psalm 89:34-36). That is why the people said, "We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is the Son of Man?" (12:34). In other words, when Jesus spoke about a seed dying, the people did not believe it because they had a different idea. The messiah was supposed to conquer. The messiah was supposed to live. The idea of the messiah dying did not make sense.

When was the last time God worked in the exact way you thought He would? God's ways are not our ways. God often surprises us. We see this all throughout the Bible. To Noah God said, "Build an ark."

To Abraham God said, "Sacrifice your one and only son." To Moses God said, "Lead the people across the Red Sea." To Ezekiel God said, "Tell the bones to come alive."

God even surprise us. In the confession and absolution, God calls us to confess so that we would be forgiven. In the waters of baptism, God promises to unite us to the death and resurrection of Jesus. At the Lord's Supper, God promises to be present in the bread and the wine for the forgiveness of sins.

God is greater than us. God is bigger than we can even imagine. Augustine once said, "If you could comprehend it, it's not God." That is the problem for the people of Israel. Their understanding of God was too small. That is why they refused Jesus invitation to follow.

Are we any different? Are we willing to follow Jesus? Are we willing to jump into the ashes with him? In truth, the saint in you already has. In the waters of baptism you jumped into death so that you would live. It is the sinner that refuses. The sinner tries to outrun the fire by his own strength and understanding. The sinner in us thinks that with the right amount of good works, education, money, job titles, and heath we will out run the fire. The sinner in us is wrong. Dead wrong!

The only way to gain your life is to lose it. The sinner in us must die. The sinner dies when we trust Jesus' promises. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life (12:25).

Conclusion

I want to end with this final thought. At 6:10 p.m. Dodge rose from the ashes after spending 15 minutes lying in them. On the third day, Jesus would rise from the earth as well. In doing this, he was vindicated. His words are trustworthy. The good news is that we can trust Jesus at his word. When Jesus says your sins are forgiven, they are forgiven. When Jesus says that he will go to prepare a place for you, he is actually preparing a place for you. When Jesus says that he will come again, he will. You can trust Jesus at his word. Jump into the ashes.

**In Jesus Name,
Amen.**

Exegesis

Literary Analysis

This passage is located within the Palm Sunday narrative. In the previous chapter, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-44) which compelled the religious leaders to plot Jesus' death (11:45-57). Following the resurrection of Lazarus, Mary anoints Jesus' feet at Bethany (12:1-8). The amount of oil demonstrates Jesus' kingship. Jesus will have more oil anointing his body after his death (19:38-42). As Jesus entered into Jerusalem, the crowd (following because Jesus raised Lazarus) called out "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel" (12:13). This causes the Pharisees to say, "Look the world as gone after him" (12:19). This statement was highlighted by the fact Greeks asked Philip (a counterpart) if they could see Jesus (12:20-22). Jesus answers the request by saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (12:23). After talking about his soul being troubled, Jesus asks God to glorify your name (12:27-28). The father responds, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again" (12:28). Jesus responds by saying, "This voice has come for your sake not mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (12:30-32). After these words, Jesus speaks of the light shining and the need for faith while time is left (12:35-50).

Pericope

vv. 17-22 World has gone after Jesus
vv. 23-28 The hour explained by Jesus and the heavenly voice
vv. 29-30 The crowd misunderstands and Jesus explains further

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29 The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.
30 Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine."

Word Study

"Fall into the earth" (peson eis ten gen) – The seed must "fall into the earth to bear much fruit."

Theology

"Seed" –
Eve's seed
Abraham's seed
David's seed

My covenant I will not break, Nor alter the word that has gone out of My lips. **35** Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David: **36** His seed shall endure forever, And his throne as the sun before Me; **37** It shall be established forever like the moon, Even *like* the faithful witness in the sky." Selah (Psalm 89:34-37).

"In your **seed** all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice." Genesis 22:18

Galatians 3:15-19

15^(X) Brethren, ^(Y) I speak in terms of human relations: ^(Z) even though it is only a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it. **16** Now the promises were spoken ^(AA) to Abraham and to his seed He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, ^(AB) "And to your seed," that is, Christ. **17** What I am saying is this: the Law, which came ^(AC) four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. **18** For ^(AD) if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but ^(AE) God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise. **19** ^(AF) Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ^(AG) ordained through angels ^(AH) by the agency of a mediator, until ^(AI) the seed would come to whom the promise had been made.

The paradox of God's glory coming through shame/death

Law/Gospel / Promise

Illustration about seeds

In preparation for the sermon for today, I wanted to find out what happened to seeds when they are planted into the ground and die. The key to the text for today focuses on the seed that dies, and so.... I called the Dunn Seed Company. I thought the Dunn Seed Company would know about seeds. So I telephoned them and said: "This is Pastor Markquart from Grace Lutheran Church in Des Moines. I am working on a sermon for this Sunday about seeds and you people are experts about seeds. I read in the Bible that Jesus said that when a seed dies, it bears much fruit. Can you tell me what happens to a seed when it is planted, that is, when it dies?" The clerk on the other end of the telephone line said, "(Long pause) That is one of the wonders of nature. Let me have you talk to my boss." So the boss got on the phone, and I said to the boss, "My name is Pastor Markquart; I am preaching a sermon about seeds.

Jesus said that unless a seed dies, it remains only one seed; but when a seed dies, it bears many seeds. Can you tell me what happens when a seed dies? I need to know. ” The boss said, “That is quite a philosophical question. The way I have it figured out is this. In every seed there is a cell of diatron which is filled with chlorophyll, and all seeds have little chlorophyll in them. For me, that’s the soul. There is cabbage chlorophyll (a cabbage soul). There is carrot chlorophyll, a carrot soul. There is asparagus chlorophyll, asparagus soul. And we, as human beings, have chlorophyll, the human soul; and if you want to live, you have chlorophyll. But I really don’t know the answer to your question, but I do advise that you call Dr. David Gibbs who has a Ph.D. in plant physiology at the University. So I telephoned Dr. Gibbs and gave him the same introduction and question, “My name is Pastor Markquart. I am preaching a sermon about Christ. The key to the sermon is this: Unless a seed dies, it remains a single seed, but if it dies, it produces many seeds and therefore much fruit. Can you tell me what happens when a seed dies?” The professor finally had the right answer. It helps to have a Ph.D. in plant physiology. He told me that inside every seed is an embryo, and in that embryo is a root which goes down into the ground; and a shoot that goes up into the sky. Every embryo has a root and a shoot; and inside that little embryo, (and this is really a miracle), there is an “on” and “off” switch. I didn’t know that. I didn’t know that seeds have “on” and “off” switches. But they do. Every seed has a little “on” and “off” mechanism. And when you plant a seed into the ground at 40 degrees for 40 days, that mechanism goes on, but if the temperature is at 20 degrees, the mechanism stays off. There is a miraculous mechanism which goes on and off. Now there is also a thin coat around that seed which protects the oxygen from coming in prematurely. And then when this dormant seed is planted into the ground, for 40 days at 40 degrees, the switch goes “on” and the seed takes in water, and it miraculously begins to expand, and the seed coat is broken, and it begins to mature and produces sugar and protein; and then out comes the little roots and the little shoots, and the shoots produce more seeds which produce more fruit. And that’s what happens when a seed dies,” said the professor. “It’s a miracle.” Thank you, Dr. Gibbs.