

“Finding our way back”

From whatever losses or failures—times when we haven’t been at our best

March 16, 2008

Text: Isaiah 49:1-6, Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75

I.

Today is Palm Sunday, a day when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the holy city. Tradition says that it was a day marked by celebration and jubilation along the way ... as Jesus, humbly but triumphantly, entered the city that was the political and spiritual center of Israel’s faith.

However, beneath the surface of the glowing accounts in the gospel stories, surely, there was heaviness in the air. Indeed, making the decision to go to Jerusalem in the first place was a serious decision.

- We remember, again, that Jerusalem was center of power in the Jewish faith; and that *speaking truth to power* is always dangerous activity.
- Jerusalem was where the Jewish elites, the high priest and his minions, held forth—overseeing the Torah and the reaches of its teachings throughout Israel.

Jerusalem was also *the holy city*, the city where all great prophets must one day come to settle their accounts with the power structures that be.

Echoes of Matthew’s gospel sound out ...

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

And the gospel of **Luke** tells us ...

*As he came near and saw the city (this is on Palm Sunday), he wept over it, saying, **If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.***

II.

Both **Matthew** and **Luke** capture a glimpse of the *pathos* of the moment. Again, we *feel* the heaviness in the air, as the forces of power are lining up: Jewish Torah, accommodated as it was to the sheer power of Roman Law. Together, they were a daunting force.

And along comes Jesus of Nazareth, riding humbly on a donkey.

Later, as reflected in our reading from **Matthew 26**, the disciples were challenged—more than they could ultimately bear—by the powers mounting up against Jesus ... as every last ounce of courage was drained from their being.

Most immediately, we remember Peter—at first, bursting with courage and conviction:

After Jesus had said to him, *Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.* And Peter in response: *Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.*

And then, of course, it all changes for Peter when the harsh realities of **fear** come too close:

1. Later that same Thursday night, sitting outside in the courtyard, with fear all around, Peter is spotted:

You also were with Jesus the Galilean, someone says.

I was not, said Peter. *I do not know what you are talking about.* Already, fear has come too close ... and words that will, later, evoke wrenching guilt are uttered.

2. And then again, ***This man was with Jesus of Nazareth ...***

And Peter, again: *I do not know the man.*

3. Then, a third time, some people came up to Peter, saying: ***You also are one of them; your accent betrays you.***

You're wrong, dead wrong; I do not know the man, said the beleaguered Peter.

And at that point, the Bible says, the cock crowed ... and Peter remembered what Jesus had said about denying him three times ... ***and he went off and wept bitterly.***

III.

For Peter, this had to be the absolute low point of his life. How could he have sunk any lower? In one moment, to profess deep conviction and commitment to Jesus ... and then, soon afterward, when things get too hot in the kitchen, to deny him—not once, but three times.

But now that this has played out as it has, what's Peter to do? We can only imagine his deep guilt the following day when Jesus was crucified ... and suffered and died on a cross. And Peter, limp, no doubt, with the pain of humiliation and shame; and then all day Saturday!! He must have been numb with self-deprecation.

And then, can we possibly imagine the inexpressible joy on Easter morning (goose bumps all over, no doubt) when the reality of resurrection began to build up in his spirit ... to the point of belief.

Finding our way back. Not an easy thing to do.

1. When all would seem to be lost. When we've messed up horribly. Done the wrong thing; said the wrong thing.
2. When we haven't been our best self.
3. When we've let ourselves down, to say nothing of those whom we most love and admire.
4. When the moment, the hour, the day, the week ... seems overwhelmed with darkness and biting regret.

And now, trying to *find our way back*.

- Trying to build up our confidence once again.
- Trying to grab hold of a ray of hope and possibility for what tomorrow might bring.
- Trying to get centered, once more, in our faith ... recheck our priorities ... get ourselves right with God and with the best God has planted in our spirit.

In sports, we hear about come backs all the time. It's such a common theme, we have *come back player of the year* awards for players who have *found their way back* ... not given up on themselves ... stayed with the process of self-renewal.

One of the nice things about sports is that—after a loss—most of the time, there's always another game. There's always tomorrow. A chance for redemption ... an opportunity to lay it all on the line once again and hope for a better result.

What sport teaches us is a *transcendent* gospel theme: **tomorrow is a new day**. It's a fresh start, with a clean slate. All praise be unto the God of infinite grace and mercy.

IV.

But of course, with sports, it's only a game. In our relationships—our marriages and stressful relationships with children, parents and friends—clearly, there's much more at stake. These relationships constitute the core of our lives. They're at the center of our *identity*, of who we are as a human being.

And so we have to measure what we say and do. We have to gauge the consequences ... think long-term and—all the time—make compromises and adjustments along the way.

Finding our way back into the good graces of a spouse or parent or child can happen. And where possible, it's important that we give it a chance. It may take time ... and patience ... and eventually, new commitments and new priorities.

But the point is—most of the time—there is a way back. The key is to initiate a constructive process of *dealing with it* ... and to always remember: ***our failures don't have to be endings.***

- It may be simply a matter of taking the time to sit down and begin to talk it through.
- Usually, the worst thing we can do is to let things fester ... and build up ... to the point, sometimes, where we lose perspective ... and we lose judgment ... and then we say or do the wrong things.

Friends, we find our way back by the *grace* of God.

It was the *grace* of God that raised Jesus from the dead. However we understand Easter, the resurrection is an act of God's grace. By the grace of God, God gave the world another chance. We messed up horribly in the events that prompted Jesus' crucifixion.

And then what were we going to do? Along with Peter and the disciples, it was too late. Already, the forces of evil were too powerful and the rapidity and intensity of events were too much. And Jesus died. But God said, *whoa, not so fast there!* And by the grace of God, we *found our way back* to hope ... and new life ... and new creation.

V.

As with Peter, sometimes events are just too much. They're too big and there's no way we can measure up to them. Sometimes things are lined up against us to the point where we just need to step back and bide our time.

So much of life is *timing* ... being in the right place at the right time. Sometimes the *right time* can only come on top of our **patience** and willingness to allow things to **slow down** a bit.

The truth is ...

- We never know what future God has in store for us.
- We never know where faith and hope can take us.
- We never know what depths of love can spring forth from forgiveness and lead to a deeper, more fulfilling relationship. The love that bursts forth out of forgiveness can do amazing things.
- We never know how bright the light of God's purposes can shine out of yesterday's darkness.

The KEY is to *give ourselves to the process* ... and **never give up** ...

VI.

In exile in Babylon, Israel could have given up. At various points along the way—over the almost five decades—no doubt, she had wanted to do that very thing.

But now, a *prophetic voice* is rising up in her people ... and Israel is in the early stages of *finding her way back*—back to her homeland ... back to Judah ... back to a re-institution of her traditions and her way if life ...

But that's not all, says the prophet ... LISTEN UP:

*It's too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob ...I will give you (get this) as a **light to the nations**, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*

Not only will Israel *find her way back*, but she'll be God's instrument in the realization of a larger, *transcendent* mission. She'll be a **light to the nations**.

You see, we never know what God has in store for us. God's energy of love and compassion ... of grace and mercy ... is always on the move.

So ...

- no matter what you're working through today ...
- no matter what you're trying to find your way back from ...
- no matter what burdens are on your plate ...
- no matter what you are seeking to rise up from ... and move beyond ... and transcend, *stay close to God*, practicing the *presence of God* in all things.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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