

Extreme Makeover: Up and Down the Mount of Ointment
Luke 19: 28-40, Luke 22:39-46
April 1, 2007

Over many years I have noticed that there are two basic types of congregations as they approach Palm/Passion Sunday and enter into Holy Week. I will call them water skiers and scuba divers. The water skiers skim across the Sundays of Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, rarely diving into the murky and dark waters of the passion, unless, of course, they accidentally fall down. Scuba divers risk by going deep into the passion narrative text and experience the depths, often painful, of Christ's suffering and death. Now the fact that there are these two types of congregations is not a judgment, but a simple reality.

Suffering is scary and dark, just like the deep waters that lurk below the surface. I have come to realize that the people of Bering are more comfortable with suffering than many Christians that I have known. You have known the suffering of ridicule and even self-loathing. You have known the suffering of premature death of friends and lovers due to AIDS. To use another metaphor, you have known the usual suffering of being a human being, but even more, the suffering of climbing the mountain and not making it all the way to the top. Mountains and ocean beds are pretty much the same, if you take away the water. If you are not a person of Bering and you are a guest today, Palm/Passion Sunday is a great Sunday to learn about the soul and theology of a congregation. Is the congregation you are visiting composed of water skiers or scuba divers? Probably all congregations have both types individually, but you will hopefully get a feel for the dominant type as you hear the congregation's story.

We reach the end of my Lenten sermon series today, an *Extreme Makeover*. This is the last time where I will bring out and reveal from my tool box a spiritual tool that God gives to us as we cooperate in God making us over in Christ's image. We've looked at a design template to construct our lives in Christ's image, at the hammer of justice, at how God is stuck to us like Super Glue. We have realized that even when we don't have a clue or tool to cope with the new thing that God is doing in our lives that we can call the carpenter. Today I want to reveal what a klutz your pastor really is. I have hit my finger with hammers before. I have cut myself with all kinds of saws and pliers and wrenches. I have many self-inflicted wounds in my life. So the last tool I want to reveal is this little tube of *Neosporin*. This is a topical antibiotic that can keep infections of all kinds from setting in the wounds we get in life. It is good stuff. If I rub it up and down cuts and scrapes that I have on my hands and fingers, I help prevent infections like resentment and hatred from setting into my soul. I want to suggest today that our journey as the people of God at Bering is like the motion that I take with my hand over our woundedness. This is our journey – to go up and down the mount of ointment, the mountain of reconciliation.

The physical location of our two gospel texts for Palm/Passion Sunday goes by the same name. It is what the Hebrew Scriptures and tradition sometimes call the "Mount of Ointment." We Christians know it only as the Mount of Olives. Let's look a little more into its history. This "mountain" is actually a 2-½ mile range to the east of Jerusalem that has three different peaks; at the eastern edge and down the slope is Bethany/Bethpage. At the western edge and down the slope is the Kidron Valley, which then rises again to the Eastern gate of Jerusalem. The only two references to this Mount

of Ointment in the Hebrew Bible are David's flight out of Jerusalem in 2nd Samuel as he flees the oncoming armies of his son, Absalom. The other reference is from the minor prophet Zechariah as the prediction that on the Day of the Lord the sign that the Mount of Ointment will split in two, and the mountain will split in two pieces, one to the north and one to the south and people will flee for their lives at the experience of this powerful earthquake. The procession scene we reenacted physically as we walked into our refurbished Sanctuary is rich with allusion – Jesus riding in as Prince of Peace on a donkey...the psalmic singing of Psalm 118 like in our opening hymn... the expectation of the liberating messiah that the prophets have predicted. At the same time we hear the echo of the words of Isaiah telling us that the anointed one has come to offer comfort to the people. But with that comfort comes the knowledge that persecution awaits. The anointed one will be struck in the back, spat on in the face, his beard plucked out. God has given the anointed the power to prick the conscious of those in power and they will lash out. But God loosens the tongue and gives a face of flint to absorb the shock. The legal language suggests that justice will be served. This is an assurance to all who follow the anointed one.

The single thread that runs through all of these scriptures is the irony that what started out as a procession of disciples singing praises of “Hosanna” will turn into an ugly mob scene shouting curses of “crucify him.” It all turned so quickly. Here's what happened. Jesus, from the moment he arrived in Jerusalem, stirred up the authorities. He proclaimed that God was ushering in a kingdom and it wasn't Caesar's! That stirred up the Roman authorities. Jesus also threatened the religious-economic order when he turned over the tables of the moneychangers. Their sweet retail operation at festival time

he described as a “den of robbers.” That really ticked off the Temple authorities. And each night Jesus would leave the city, walk through the Kidron Valley and go the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Our passion story begins by telling us that he went again that fourth night, as was his custom. But this night was different. He had prepared his disciples to take over. He knew he would be betrayed and handed over to these authorities that wanted him gone.

How many have seen Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*? Regardless of what you think of Gibson’s movie Mel does get one thing really right. He starts his movie with the pivotal scene from the passion narrative of Luke, chapters 22 and 23. Our lectionary text has Jerry reading 135 verses with you standing this morning. I was not sure you or Jerry could take that kind of suffering. So we have edited it down to six crucial verses with which Mel begins his movie. That scene shows Christ’s passionate prayers to God in his native Aramaic language. We see his pleading to God to live, yet surrendering to God saying, “not my will but your will be done.” We see the darkness of that night with the torch-carrying crowd coming to seize Jesus. We see the sleeping of the disciples. If we had multimedia that is how we would begin our worship today.

Because the people of Bering have experienced suffering (what “passion” means) I think we understand this scene. To remain committed Christians in the face of persecution we understand what the statement of surrender, “Thy Will be done” really means. We live in a time for our LGBT people in which we know that persecution from church and society has not run its full course. Like the suffering servant of Isaiah, much of the plucking of our beards, the spitting in our face, the stones thrown at our heads, will continue.

But our future course is still open-ended, isn't it? I want to reflect on what must not only get in our heads and hearts, but also what we must recommit to in our actions on the Palm/Passion Sunday. First, unlike the disciples, we cannot afford to fall asleep. Even though like them we are drugged by sorrow, overcome with the grief of the past, we must stay awake and alert. We have to stay awake through this night of change. There is change on the horizon in terms of justice and civil rights for LGBT people. We must stay awake to see through the changes in society and church that allow us to love legally and with full rights. We must stay awake through the changes that allow us to serve God fully, using all the gifts that God has given us in every house of public worship in the land. Especially we need to stay awake for the change that will ultimately happen in the United Methodist Church.

But our friend Troy Plummer is right about the fact that it is more than about ecclesial and civil rights in church and society. It is about God's message of justice. It is about ordering the world to God's vision for God's people. At the end of the day, even if we fail and go silent, even if we fall asleep in pain and suffering, even if we are somehow silenced like the Pharisees asked Jesus to silence his followers, the stones will cry out this message of justice and love. There is a tale told of that great English actor Macready. An eminent preacher once said to him: "I wish you would explain to me something." "Well, what is it? I don't know that I can explain anything to a preacher." "What is the reason for the difference between you and me? You are appearing before crowds night after night with fiction, and the crowds come wherever you go. I am preaching the essential and unchangeable truth, and I am not getting any crowd at all." Macready's answer was this: "This is quite simple. I can tell you the difference between us. I present my fiction as

though it were truth; you present your truth as though it were fiction." We must not speak as if the truth that we know in our hearts is some kind of fiction. We must proclaim the truth of the gospel like Jesus did – with life-changing power. Now suffering will be involved, but even the stones will cry out for justice.

Fortunately we have our Neosporin to treat the wounds we will receive along the way. I have observed something incredible about children. You saw it too this morning in Children's Time. You can't really get rapport with a child, especially a little child, until you enter into the world of their suffering – their "boo boos." They may run up to you with a cut or a scrape and if you say, "Oh that's interesting" you will have lost them. You need to get down on your knees and look at the wound and feel their pain. But if you really want to bond with a child, you have to show them your boo boo's too. Who knows about your boo boos? Are you skiing through life without showing any of your suffering to another human being or have you dove deeply to enter into another person's pain? You got to do it if you're going to heal. It is hard to heal alone. In the end the best resources we have – for knowing God, for social action, for healing – are in the authentic, deep relationships we share with one another. You won't learn that water skiing through life. You'll only learn it by experiencing the deep waters of suffering. But as you emerge from those waters you'll find healing, wholeness and everlasting truth.