

Deep in the current: Called to deep hope

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29;
John 12:9-22; Philippians 2:5-11

Have you ever been caught in the pull of a rip tide or a river current? I spent hour's body surfing during summer vacations as a kid, especially when typhoons were near and the waves were huge. But when we visited a beach at Rio de Janeiro, I got scared. I noticed not a lot of people were in the water. But eagerly I jumped right in. The beach dropped off fast. And all of a sudden, I found myself barely able to stand. I was shocked by the strength of the water's pull, trying to take me away from shore. So I quickly decided this was not the place for me. But it took a lot of work to get out of the water. The current was so strong.

Our focus statement is: As we follow Jesus into Holy Week, we see the resistance of the Pharisees and we sense the rush of the crowds. We are asked to seek the deep, steady current of God's steadfast love, calling us to deep hope in the One who comes in the name of the Lord.

As Jesus rides into Jerusalem in John's telling of the Palm Sunday story, we feel the pull of seemingly competing currents. There is the pull of the crowds and their lofty expectations, the lack of understanding of the disciples, the stubbornness of the Jewish religious leaders, and Jesus' inevitability of the journey to the cross, which we follow through Holy Week.

The path of Jesus took him from a dinner at Bethany with Lazarus, Mary and Martha; to Mary anointing the feet of Jesus with Judas objecting; to Jesus defending and explaining Mary's action by saying, "Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always." What an interesting way for Jesus to notify people of his coming death.

As competing expectations swirl on the surface, what is the deeper current that carries Jesus along on Palm Sunday? How do we identify the movement of God even in our urgent pace

of life? The hymn in Philippians and the rejected cornerstone of Psalm 118 draw us into what is deeper, a steady current to give us hope that closed tombs are never the final word of the story. And the Isaiah passage speaks as if the Messiah were giving a talk.

We tend not to think of a wind as a current. But for our purposes today, let's consider a plough wind, a tornado, a derecho & so on as a current we don't want to get caught up in. We know how destructive a strong wind can be. One day sitting on Willis' and Marlys patio, we could see and hear the approach of a plow wind. We grabbed various items and scattered.

People tried to see Lazarus in the run up to Jesus' triumphal entry. The fact that Lazarus was raised from the dead, caused people to be super curious. I suspect many were swept along by this news. What did Lazarus look like? Had he really died? Was he really alive? This was breaking news. People kept telling others who told others, who had to see for themselves.

This gave the Pharisees another reason to kill Jesus. Why not do the same to Lazarus? And notice, the Bible says many people began to believe in Jesus. Not just a few. **This was the final straw for the Jewish religious leaders. It's the first group we look at.**

They had been working against Jesus all along. They did not want the crowds to follow him. The chief priests and Pharisees didn't have the equipment and same kind of power as modern police forces do. They missed the deep hope Jesus was offering. Instead they were a threatening malevolent presence as we found out in how they questioned people like the man born blind and healed by Jesus and then kicked him out of the synagogue. They challenged Jesus, his teachings, his healings and tried to trap him in his logic and healings. They questioned, examined, accused, and wanted to arrest Jesus. And they plotted to kill him. We can see all of this as their attempts at swaying the crowds to their perspective about Jesus.

But they were not successful. In our scripture from John they said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him." No matter what they did to control Jesus & His crowds, Jesus was gaining popularity! His crowds were getting carried away in the current of excitement, wonder and hope. The leaders could have thought Jesus had won the crowd over that Palm Sunday.

The chief priests were mostly Sadducees but the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection. Lazarus was a living example of life after death, with lots of witnesses. So having him around was an embarrassment to their theological system and themselves. They concluded, the only solution to this discomfoting problem was to put Lazarus to death along with Jesus. In this the Pharisees and Sadducees, who often strongly argued, could agree. So they got carried away, plotting to kill Jesus and Lazarus.

We could compare it to the Trump gathering & march to the US capital building and then the invasion of the building, to try to prevent the certification of the election. Some people were clearly primed for a riot. And I suspect quite a few were swept along into actions they now regret. And others although they were there that day, didn't get carried away into violence and breaking the law. It's an example of how easy it can be to get pulled into a current – swept up into behaviors that are not life giving.

This is a reason to know ourselves & our values so we don't get caught up in things we regret. It's one reason I've always prayed that my children and now my grandchildren find and have good friends. Not those who lead them astray. When we were considering putting our youngest into pre-school, the principle said to us, "Do you want your child to be a follower, or someone who is a little older & mature?" So we took the option of holding her back a year. We could do this as she is a September birthday

Another group to look at besides the Jewish religious leaders were certain Greeks. They

asked to meet with Jesus because of the hope they saw & heard. None of the other Gospels tell us of this incident. It's unique to John because he wrote to present the truth of Jesus in a way Greeks could understand.

We don't know the background of these certain Greeks. They may have been Greek converts to Judaism. Or were Greek God-fearers, those who had respect for Judaism but didn't convert and become circumcised. They may have come into contact with Old Testament teachings, drawn by its purity, its monotheism, & its clear message of the nature and the greatness of God. Or they were simply curious Greek travelers at the right time and place to want to meet this person everyone was talking about. And they probably heard of Jesus' reputation as a teacher and worker of miracles, including Lazarus.

But there could have been a more special reason. Between verses 19 and 20 a day or two had elapsed. Jesus was no longer on the road to Jerusalem, but teaching daily in the temple area. And according to Mark 11:15-17, he had expelled the moneychangers and traders from the outer court of the temple. It was the place for foreigners, to worship and pray.

I suspect these Greeks recognized this action as having been done in the interests of Gentiles like themselves who, when they wanted to worship the true God, were confined to the noisy outer court. So they asked Jesus' disciple, Philip, which is a Greek name, if they could see Jesus. What they did know about Jesus made them want to meet him. "We would like to see Jesus" is a request more people could ask.

These certain Greeks were more prudent than I was when I was in Papua New Guinea. Even though they were swept up in the current of that Passover, they made a good choice – to seek out an opportunity to learn more about Jesus.

In Papua New Guinea, I heard of a dangerous but fun activity that I wanted to try. So when I heard a group was going, I and a number of others, did something foolish, not once but

several times. Being in the mountains, there was no lack of streams and rivers, mostly fast moving. Simply put, we risked our lives for a time of thrill as we tied inner tubes together, and rafted, if you could call it that, down a river. Some of the ride was nice and fast. But there were parts that were bumpy and spray soaked us. And then there were sections and bends that took us over some rapids and we had to try to steer around big rocks. It was fun!

But we were not near any road. To get to and from where we got in the river and where we got out, took some arduous hiking. Especially carrying tire tubes. And our ride took us away from any road and any help if something went wrong. We could not really steer ourselves, which made the ride more dangerous. We didn't have life jackets. And we were told to not just hang on to the ropes tying the tubes together; we were to catch people who lost their grip. Why? They could easily fall into the water and simply put, be swept away.

There were no medics or helicopters or people to rescue us if anything went wrong. We had no idea where we would end up if we missed our exit point. It took luck and some skill to stop there. This was not a nice easy leisurely ride. It was exhilarating as we had little control as the current took us. I didn't have the eye sight I have today so it was difficult to see, as we were swept down by the current. Plus water was always in my face. And the water was cold. If we got swept down river for too long and far, hypothermia would be a problem. But did I say – I had lots of scary fun!

Let's look at another group that Passover: the crowds – that fickle crowd. Tradition tells us that people came from all over. It was a common hope for Jews to get to this feast at least once in their life time. Many scholars think the population of Jerusalem swelled by 100,000. Just like when a city hosts the Gray Cup, a farm show or any major event.

“Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us that one year a census was taken of the number of

lambs slain for Passover and that figure was 256,500. In other words, with numbers this large, lambs must literally be driven up to Jerusalem throughout the entire day. Jewish law required that the Passover lamb live with the family for at least 3 days before sacrifice (Ex. 12:3-6). So when Jesus came and went into Jerusalem, lambs for sacrifice would surround him & everyone else. Consequently, when Jesus entered the city He must have done so surrounded by lambs, Himself being the greatest of lambs.” (Boice)

So the crowd was pumped up, excited, hopeful. It was easy for them to get out of control. They hoped for a king, the Messiah to lead them. That's why the Romans always had additional troops stationed in and around Jerusalem. So you add the excitement of this major religious festival, to the news of Lazarus and Jesus. If someone was going to try to start a political movement and insurrection, like many Jews wanted, and expected Jesus to do, Passover was a good time. People's passions & hopes were stirred up & could more easily be manipulated.

This can happen in religious gatherings. I attended the Gaither Homecoming gathering, in Indianapolis, two years in a row. It attracted around 10,000 people. It was a wonderful few days with individual singers and groups, lots of workshops, well known speakers, and mass worship times. It was refreshing. But one time before worship, it was clear people were really pumped. The air literally crackled with excitement. You could sense something in the air.

For whatever reason, we were all ready and full of expectation for worship. But, Bill Gaither must have detected that many of us were too wound up. So he deliberately punctured our emotions and calmed us down. I think he sensed that we could have too easily gone out of control. We could have become swept up in something good - or something bad. I view Bill Gaither's actions both as good – and also wonder – what would it have been like, if he had not adjusted the program, to pop our bubbles of excitement.

What did Palm Sunday mean to Jesus? He was deliberately fulfilling an Old Testament Messianic prophecy from Zechariah. He was declaring Himself to be the Messianic King the crowds were shouting about. The original text says, "Shout and Rejoice greatly." But John changes it to: "Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion." This changed tells us some terrifying and unexpected events were about to happen. But the great crowds of people & the religious leaders had nothing to fear, because God's plan for the Messiah was being carried out.

The crowds were shouting, "Hosanna!" which means "Save!" But the Almighty's plan for salvation was different than the crowds. Instead of riding in on a war chariot or a big war horse, Jesus rode in on the foal of a donkey. He had planned this out before hand. So it wasn't an accident. It was an intentional message of the type of kingdom Jesus was leading. He came into Jerusalem to die, as part of God's plan.

So it makes sense for John to write, "Do not be afraid." Because the expected Savior had a different plan than the people did. I'm sure lots of people were disappointed. Wrapping your head around a humble Messiah, by means of a suffering and dying Messiah, is difficult. Even today. It's why the shouts turned to "Crucify Him," days later. They did not understand; they did not get what they wanted, their hopes were crushed; so they responded with hate. Jesus just did not meet their expectations.

Neither did he meet the disciple's hopes. **This is the last group we will study.** We are told, they did not understand. Even though Jesus had told them and taught them and explained to them, the disciples totally misunderstood what was happening. They lacked the perspective of the cross and the grave. They probably did not realize how Jesus was fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah. They did not realize Jesus was the promised Messiah who would suffer and die. They did not realize that God's salvation plan was being carried out. Everything seems obvious to us. This was not the case for the disciples. Their hopes were dashed.

But they did not join the crowd or the Jewish religious leaders. They resisted those currents of attitudes and understanding. Even in their grief, distress, reflection and fears, they stuck with Jesus. Later they began to understand, believe, have hope & get events into perspective. After the cross and the grave, when the risen glorified and ascended Christ sent His Holy Spirit, then they understood. They needed their risen Lord, to appear and explain. They needed the ministry of the Holy Spirit to guide and lead them into all truth and real deep hope.

We've looked at the meaning of Palm Sunday for the Jewish leaders, the certain Greeks, the crowds, Jesus, and the disciples. We've looked at being swept up in the current of jealousy, hate, curiosity, hope, great expectations that became disappointment and misunderstanding. We looked at how Jesus planned out this Palm Sunday to be faithful to his purpose & mission. But what does Palm Sunday mean to you? How does it sweep you up?

The world is full of people like the religious leaders who resist Jesus; the crowds who hope in their own kind of savior; plus the confused, hopeless and disappointed disciples. But the world is also full of people like the certain Greeks, who say, "We would like to see Jesus."

This is what we do each Sunday. And every day. This is what we pray for when we pray for people and the world. That we would see Jesus. This is what we desire when we participate in Holy Communion. We hope that our hope grows deeper. May we be among the people who join in and participate in, the deep steady current of God's steadfast love, calling us to deep hope in the One who comes in the name of the Lord. As you prepare to participate in Holy Communion next week, please join the certain Greeks as well as Jesus first disciples in this special act of worship. Let's join their current of faith and belief and trust and hope.