

“Destiny Calls!”

As I studied today’s text of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem which begins Holy Week, I found myself asking the question: “Did it really have to end like this?” Was this the only possible destiny for Jesus? Destiny is defined in the dictionary as “the inevitable or necessary fate to which a particular person or thing is destined; the predetermined or inevitable course of events beyond one’s power or control.” What shaped the destiny of Jesus’ life and what shapes the destiny of our lives?

On that first Palm Sunday Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem the very same way that king David and kings of Israel who came after David would enter the city for their coronation. He comes in humbly, riding on a donkey, without crown or regal attire. It is the people who proclaim his kingship; it is the crowd that shouts “hosanna” which meant not only praises but was the cry of “save us.” Hosannas were cries for salvation! And salvation from Roman oppression was what the people wanted! Here comes Jesus, like other kings: Son of God, Savior of the world!

The writer of Matthew knows full well these expectations of the people and why it might have been reasonable for them to expect Jesus to fulfill their plans for Jesus’ destiny. Jesus is a powerful figure; he is humble yet exhibits intentionality of purpose--God’s purpose.

His coming to Jerusalem reminds me of the return of Benazir Bhutto to Pakistan where she knew her life would be in danger, and yet her purpose, her destiny was clear. She was not naive to what might happen; but destiny called her to return, to proclaim truth, to bear witness no matter the outcome. Like Jesus, her purposes were nonviolent, and throughout the passion narrative in Matthew, Jesus proclaims a **nonviolent destiny**.

His disciples think nonviolence is impossible; in the garden of Gethsemene, one of them draws out his sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest’s slave. Verse 52 says, “Then Jesus said to him, **‘Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.’**” The destiny to which Jesus was called was a destiny of nonviolent resistance which was ultimately successful; I think sometimes we forget that; but that’s the Easter story and we haven’t gotten there yet.

By the time Jesus enters Jerusalem tensions are so thick they could be cut with a knife. Was there no other way out? Did it have to end like this? Was this the only destiny? Ed shared with me some wonderful research by Krister Stendahl, and because Stendahl’s words lend a clarity greater than what I could offer, I would like to read to you some of his insights about this final week of Jesus.

“When history is in the making, before it has been organized and interpreted, such things are never that clear. If that is forgotten, Christians easily read the passion story in a self-righteous mood. It becomes almost inconceivable to us how the leaders could be so evil and the governor so irresponsible.

“But I can well imagine the leaders coming home to their wives late that morning, saying: ‘We had a very difficult case in the council. We tried to be wise and understanding, but he was impossible and totally unwilling to bend or even cooperate. So we had to...’ And judged by his stands of political wisdom and administrative competence, both their decision and Pilate’s actions would be acceptable to us--if they were not part of this story.

“These were not evil people. These were not people trying to scheme or even enjoying their wicked scheming. On the contrary, they decided what they honestly considered to be best for all under the circumstances. The gruesome truth of the passion narrative is one well know from history: Most evil--serious evil--in this world is done by people who think they are doing good.

“Evil is not that popular. If evil were done only by those who ganged together and said ‘Let us be evil together!’ then evil would not spread far. No, most evil is done by people who think they are good and doing their best....So the question is obvious: What am I doing now, what am I involved in now--shouting or timidly silent--that actually perpetuates innocent suffering in the world? My intentions are not to be trusted. To be of good will is not enough.”

I remember five years ago, my thoughts were pleading that war wouldn't begin on my birthday. As I approach Holy Week this year, I struggle with a war that was both preemptive and was and will be devastating. My struggles are weighted with humility. But there are some parallels to that first Palm Sunday that I can't get out of my mind.

Five years ago some people expected (like some in the Palm Sunday crowd) that military power would be the answer. The disciple who struck the ear of the high priests must have believed the means justified the ends. And we've known a sense of betrayal when evidence meant to justify war was found to be untrue. With so much at stake, consequences so cosmic, intelligence failed us.

On the day Jesus died, most of his fervent disciples ran off rather than watch him die. They denied even being a part of his great cause. Today I force myself to watch the faces and read the obituaries of women and men who have died in Iraq; I am part of my beloved country; I will not look away or turn off the news. As I wrote this sermon, I had this terrifying feeling that perhaps my daughter's friend, Michael, was one who had died in Baghdad this week. To ease my mind I called his parents only to find out that he was home on a 15 day leave. Though I'd regularly sent Michael packages, this Friday, I got to hear his voice for the first time. I told him that he had been on our prayer list every week. This year my Holy Week will be one of keeping vigil; of remembering; of counting the costs; of praying for peace; of praying for forgiveness and of forgiving.

If I had been in Jerusalem long ago as the crowd watched and cheered and turned on Jesus, who would I have been? I do not know. What destiny would have called to me? What destiny calls to me today? Yet, I continue to ask: did it really have to end this way? When Jesus death finally happens, it is a cosmic and global drama; it is the death of God's Son. Jesus last words were of despair. And then there is silence, darkness, nothingness, as though the world has ended. Here is Stendahl's eloquent summation of that ending:

"It is important that we catch that moment. For his death was real. On the human level he had been defeated. It is not true to say that such love as he had could not be overcome. It was. God had to make a new beginning--in the resurrection. And God did.

"But in this world truth and justice and love--even incarnate in the wonderful Jesus of Nazareth--can be defeated and trampled down. Among us here love's labor is often lost. Evil is strong indeed. Our hope is not a romantic optimism, the rope trick of positive thinking. Our hope is in God's power to begin again, to renew destroyed life.

"Even the majestic Jesus...died in utter loneliness, without a sign or token of life in his soul or body. But God began again. We are defeated, even the Son of God was defeated. But God was not.

"The silence between Good Friday and Easter morning is the time to purify our hope from all false reasons and props. It is the moment to learn to love not the gifts of God--they can be taken away from our life and consciousness--but to love God who gives us life in his time and his way--and that abundantly. But that is Easter."