

Congregational Church of Pinehurst
United Church of Christ
Palm/Passion Sunday
March 20, 2016

Mark's Passion Narrative

They Will Rise

We all want a savior, don't we?

We all want to be swept off our feet
and into the arms of safety and happiness.

We all want something or someone outside ourselves
to rescue us from the fallout of our lives,
and the life of the world.

We all want a savior.

And so we look for them everywhere.

We look for quick fixes for the things that trouble us most---
the medication that we saw on the drug commercial
that promised us less pain or better sex
or successful weight loss,
without having to change our lifestyle, of course.

Without telling us the truth about how
their drug often creates other problems
while trying to fix one.

We look for politicians

who promise to "Make America Great Again"
or tout the virtues of American exceptionalism
without telling us the first thing about how they will do that,
or by telling us that by using our military might
all will be right with the world.

Without telling us the truth
that the world is a complicated place
without easy solutions.

And that the work of democracy is hard and difficult,
and requires the dedication and energy
and vigilance of every citizen to make it work.

We look for pastors
who are flashy and smooth
and carry a bible in the glove compartments of their car,
and are absolutely sure that they know the way to heaven.
Without ever revealing to us that they have clay feet---
that they are just as human, often more so,
than everybody else---
that most days they aren't sure
about the condition of their own souls,
much less about how to save anyone else's.

And yet, we all look for saviors,
placing idealistic expectations on external sources,
perhaps because that seems easier
than facing the truth
that God has planted the seeds of salvation
deep within ourselves
if we have the courage to nurture them.

And so it probably shouldn't surprise us,
that on that bright sunny morning thousands of years ago,
Jesus came riding into Jerusalem
on a humble donkey,
and the crowds that gathered
wanted to make him king.

Because who doesn't want a savior?
And, to give them the benefit of the doubt,
Jesus was a pretty likely candidate.
His spiritual attuness allowed him
to be a conduit of healing energy to others
in ways that were amazing, if not miraculous.

His courage in speaking the truth to power,
and in hanging out with the poor and marginalized
was inspiring.

The wisdom of his spiritual teaching was life-changing
for those who dared to receive it
and integrate it into their own lives.

So if you were looking for a savior,

Jesus would be a pretty likely candidate, would he not?

But it's interesting that as best we can tell,
Jesus never saw *himself* as a savior.

In fact, he seemed to do everything he could
to discourage folks from thinking of him in that way.

"Only my Father in heaven is perfect,"

Jesus once told the crowds.

And finally when the crowds realized this truth,
they became so angry at Jesus for letting them down
that they traded his life for the life of a convicted murderer
just because they could.

Everybody wants a savior,
but beware of the fate of a savior who doesn't deliver
everything their subjects desire.

This day of all days reminds us that the outcome isn't pretty.

So what's left to hope for?

What are we to do?

Those are the questions that Palm Sunday asks?

And perhaps those of us who are Christians
could begin by doing what Jesus did.

Imagine that.

Jesus didn't seem to spend his time looking for saviors.
Instead he planted seeds.

Not literal ones mind you,
though he did tell an awful lot of stories about soil and seeds.
But those stories actually were Jesus' seeds.

He went around constantly telling stories
that planted seeds in people's hearts and minds---
stories that turned the way things are upside down.
Stories that dared to imagine a world where people shared,
and treated every person with the dignity worthy
of a child of God,
and worked together to alleviate suffering and injustice.
But it seems that Jesus' stories only made the powerful mad.
And though the less powerful were enthusiastic at first,
they didn't seem to get it,
that Jesus didn't and couldn't
do this world-changing work for them.

Everyone had their part to play in the work
of God's kindom coming on earth,
as it was in heaven.
And so it seems that Jesus
was a threat to some,
and a disappointment to others.
And they put him to death for that----literally,
and immediately started to look for the next savior.
And so it goes and will go forever,
"world without end, Amen,"
until people begin to lay claim to their seeds.
Until we begin to lay claim to our seeds.

You see, Jesus tried to tell us before we killed him,
that God had place the seeds of God's kindom
within us----each of us.
And if we planted these seeds of love and justice,
and reconciliation and peace,
and imagination and creativity---
if we planted these seeds,
the kindom of God would come.

Oh, not overnight,
not without pain and sorrow,
and conflict and uncertainty and loss,
but the kingdom would come.

Farmers and gardeners can tell us
that all seeds do not come up.
There is no guarantee of that.
But most seeds will come up,
if they are planted in good soil,
and given sunlight and regularly watered,
most seeds will come up,
that's the miracle of the way the Spirit of Life
is infused in all the earth.

And spiritual farming
is the task that all those who wish to co-create with God
are called to,
no matter their age or creed or race or sexual orientation.
That is the task of God's faithful people---
no matter how dark the night,
or desperate the odds,
planting the seeds of love and justice and compassion
is our reason for being,
even on a day as seemingly hopeless as this one.

Some 20 years ago,
when I was pastoring my first church,
I went to Richmond, VA to attend a preaching conference.
It was a difficult time in my life,
and I was desperate for some sermon inspiration.

One of the preachers for the conference,
whose name I regret I cannot remember,
was on the faculty of Virginia Union Seminary,
which was and I believe still is
a predominantly African-American school.

At any rate, this outstanding preacher was delivering his sermon
with all the energy and rhythm
that great African-American preaching is known for.

*Do ya know what happens when you bury a seed in the ground
he shouted, wiping the sweat from his brow.
It rises.*

*Do ya know what happens
when you try to bury love in the ground he shouted,
It rises.*

*Do ya know what happens when you try to bury justice
In the ground he shouted,
(and we were getting the hang of the cadence
So we all shouted back)
It rises.*

*Do ya know what happens
when ya try to bury kindness in the ground?
It rises, we shouted.*

*Do ya know what happens
when you try to bury forgiveness in the ground?
It rises.*

*Do ya know what happened
when they tried to bury Jesus in the ground
he shouted at the very top of his lungs,
And we, some of us now on our feet, shouted back,
He rises. Jesus rises.*

I had to leave the conference early that afternoon,
so I had to walk across a desolate parking lot
in the sunny heat of that day
to the very back row where I had parked.
And when I got to my car,
and looked down at the dirt at the end of the row
where I had parked,

I saw something shiny, glistening in the sun.
It was just barely visible.
And upon closer inspection,
I saw that it was just the tip of something larger.
So with my finger, I dug at it until I could pull it up---
until I could see that it was a plain,
unadorned silver cross.
I am not ashamed to tell you
that I stood there in the sun and cried.
And that I carried that cross in my pocket each day,
for over a year,
until one day I lost it.
But I did not lose the words it had spoken to me.
*Plant the seeds that Jesus planted with his life,
and they will rise. Oh, they will rise.*

And there is no time like the present for planting.
Today is the day.
Today is the day
that we are called on to plant the seeds
that Jesus planted with his very life.
We are invited to be faithful
with the seeds we have each been given,
and to tend them with our own lives,
even on a dark, dark day such as this.
We are called to courageously open ourselves---
even on this day---
to the possibility that God will be faithful
to raise them up,
even after **we** are gone.

May it be so. Thanks be!
Amen.

Rev. Brent A. Bissette