

“Hindsight is 20/20”

Palm/Passion Sunday ~ March 25, 2018

John 12:12-16

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Have you ever caught yourself or someone else defending an unwise decision with the phrase: “*Well, hindsight is 20/20*” or “*if I knew then what I know now...?*” It is true that there are so many times in life that clarity only comes with time and experience. Just ask my 3 year old!

If it is true that we must learn to see or understand matters of daily life, safety, and relationships through experience and reflection, our gospel passage this morning makes it explicit that **we too must learn to see Christ’s saving activity in our lives through a reflective practice—spiritual hindsight that keeps the cross, resurrection and ascension of Jesus in view.**

Let’s take a closer look at our text for today. *

When we arrive on the scene of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem in the gospel of John, there are palm branches, the symbol of national triumph and victory, waving everywhere and people shouting: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one that comes in the name of the Lord, the king of Israel” (John 12:13). These shouts of praise and appeals for saving action are those used in the thanksgiving psalm (Ps. 118) used to celebrate the return of a victorious King to Jerusalem and his procession to the temple. This song celebrates the miraculous victory of a king who had overcome near defeat and death by the hand of God. People are nearly hysterical, and the news of Jesus’ raising of Lazarus from the dead is everywhere. In this royal welcome the crowds were ready to crown Jesus their warrior king and savior right there on the spot, being sure they had their national hero to free Israel from Roman control. The disciples are no doubt being pressed in from all sides along with Jesus and probably experiencing a whole host of emotions from awe to excitement. This is what they have been waiting for. At last, Jesus is going to allow the people to make him king and they will finally see the fruition of all their sacrifice. After all, they all left their livelihoods and families with a belief that Jesus would be the one to change everything. Recall the rivalry between the disciples about who would get to be on the right and left of Jesus (Matthew 20). They really had been preparing and anticipating a radical change in status. Years of waiting, listening to

confusing stories and parables, and being bullied by the religious authorities are finally going to pay off!!! ... And then Jesus responds to the crowd's zeal with his choice to have the disciples fetch him a young donkey, not even a donkey that is trained for riding yet. What is Jesus doing?

For us, we celebrate this Sunday every year and we have grown accustomed to the thought of Jesus riding in on his donkey, but if you were present in this moment in history and had given up everything to align yourself with Jesus trusting he was the one who would rise up and restore the Jewish nation and overthrow Roman rule, this would have been nothing short of anticlimactic. And for the disciples who were among the zealots, this would have been cause for outrage. Our gospel writer makes it clear that Jesus' choice of the donkey was a direct clarifying response to the political and nationalist agendas the people were imposing on him. Jesus knew exactly what kind of king he was, and it was not what the crowds had in mind! The disciples and the crowd went along in the charged current that had already been created as they followed Jesus riding on this lowly creature, but judging by the behavior of the disciples and the crowds over the next few days, it is no doubt that this donkey entrance put a dampening on things.

In the midst of all this shouting and hysteria, our gospel writer references two Old Testament scripture passages that prophesy about God's restoration of Jerusalem with messianic overtones. The first is "Do not fear" which comes from Zephaniah 3:15-16: "The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst, you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion..." The second passage is Zechariah 9:9, "Lo, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." But the gospel writer makes a self disclosure: **"His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him."** (John 12:16).

This is one of those places in scripture that the disciples become incredibly relatable. I have heard so many people in Bible studies assume that it would be easier to have faith or make sense of Jesus if we had the advantage of Jesus' presence in real time like the disciples did. But the good and bad news is that Jesus confounded even those right there in his midst. At this point in the narrative of Jesus' ministry, the people and the disciples have the right

idea in recognizing Jesus as king, but **the disciples admittedly do not grasp what kind of king Jesus is until after the cross, and neither can we.**

The scripture passages that this gospel writer quotes to show that Jesus truly fulfills the true nature of the messiah and God's promises of salvation *only come to mind* when the disciples are no longer sidekicks of a great warrior king but instead outcasts in their faith circles, disciples of an executed rabbi, and men known to huddle behind locked doors for fear of their lives.

The realization of Jesus' true identity as King and Messiah and the confidence by which to believe it did not come to the disciples in the midst of the excitement of palms, but only after great failure, pain, suffering, fear, loss, and utter despair. We get to read the prophecies about Jesus that help us hang on and not close our bibles too quickly at this point in the story only because of the costly faithfulness of Jesus' first disciples. John 12:16 serves as a very pastoral encouragement to us today who did not get to know and hear Jesus first-hand. **It is the disciples' testimony that Jesus was never possible to grasp or truly *follow* until after he had died and resurrected.**

Earlier, I asserted that we aren't surprised and horrified by Jesus choosing to ride in on a donkey. But, in fact, we actually are in real time. Not while sitting comfortably in church rows or Bible study, but when we find ourselves looking for Jesus to rise to the occasion to heal, help, or save us in the midst of great illness, personal tragedy, injustice, or loss and God's salvation does not arrive as we expect. **We too doubt or at times reject this donkey-riding King who refuses to conform to our vision of justice or act timely to our cries of hosanna—save us! But it is in exactly such times that we come the closest to the cross of Jesus.**

The cross represents God's willingness to fully enter and take on the injustices, unfairness, death, despair, betrayal, and brokenness within all human lives and society without any anesthetics all while holding the power to escape. The resurrection is Christ's complete defeat of all the powers and forces of death and darkness—*but only after going through them*. And Christ's ascension is the hope and promise that God remains completely whole, in power, and in governance of all things and all time. Christ did indeed take his throne...just not on earth for a few years, but for *all time* in *heaven*.

To reflect on life through the lenses of the cross is to gradually come to see Christ as present—hanging in there with you (pun intended) in the very midst of your deepest pains, losses, defeats, and failures. But it is also a practice in learning to see new life, new possibilities, and hope breaking in where there had been only emptiness or pain. **To truly praise and recognize Christ as King, you have to recognize Christ on the cross and Christ’s resurrecting life-giving power in your own life and in lives around you. This can only be done through intentional reflection, guided by help of the Holy Spirit and grounded in scripture.**

In his comments about John 12:16, Fred Craddock says “All of us should pause again to be blessed by the thought that distance from a person or an event is not always a negative factor. Distance can sharpen rather than blur understanding, and hence increase faith and participation.” (*John*, 92).

When done consciously and intentionally, reflecting and interpreting events in our lives and history through the lenses of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ is nothing short of *an act of faith*.

So what does this look like? Let me tell you a story.

Vincent Donovan worked in Africa from 1955 to 1973 as a Catholic missionary to the Masai people, who he chose to serve as a departure from his denomination’s traditional missionary efforts and methods out of a sense of call. His insights and methods presented a radical change in missionary thinking during the 20th century. In an essay at the end of Donovan’s *Christianity Rediscovered 25th Anniversary Edition*, his sister Nora says that “his struggles to honestly present the Christian gospel to people of a different culture caused him to wrestle with his own faith” (p. 167). She asked herself “How did the young idealistic missionary of 1955 evolve into the mature weathered evangelist of 1973?” (p. 167).

During his work, Vincent, writes that he felt he had “got off to a fairly good start in teaching the Masai about God and creation but got truly bogged down when he came to man and salvation and sin,” (p. 47) He says he had to face the difficulty alone and that it almost finished him—he nearly gave up and almost lost his own faith (p. 47).

If any of you have every felt the pain of failure in an endeavor that meant a great deal to you—perhaps a career or project ending in disappointment, a dream or vision never launched, a personal limitation or broken relationship you simply could not heal, or the loss of a deeply held hope in your life—then you can relate to what Vincent was experiencing.

Like our gospel writer, Vincent wrote, “It is all clear to me now, many years later. It was not clear to me when I began to evangelize the Masai,” (p. 47). You see, Vincent had not yet reflected on his struggle and failure from the viewpoint of the cross and resurrection. In doing so, he came to realize that it was not his job as missionary to convince the Masai of sin. “They [knew] of sin. What they did not know was forgiveness” (p. 47).

In his despair and crisis of faith, Vince started talking to a Masai elder about the “agony of belief and unbelief,” (p. 48). The wise old man said “We did not search you out, Padri....We did not even want you to come to us. You searched us out. You followed us away from your house into the bush....into the hills where we take our cattle...into our homes. You told us of the High God, how we must search for him, even leave our land and our people to find him. But we have not done this. We have not searched for him. He has searched for us. He has searched us out and found us. All the time we think we are the lion. The lion is God,” (p. 48)

It was after hearing this perspective that the forgiveness and grace of the cross came into view and the hope for the birth of a new understanding of God was resurrected before him. He realized in awe: “The lion is God. Of course. Goodness and kindness and holiness and grace and divine presence and creating power and salvation were here before I got here,” (p. 48) From then on he took up his role as messenger of the gospel of Christ with a new awareness that his role was only a part “which fit into the immeasurably greater plan of the relentless, pursuing God...” (p. 49).

Vincent eventually moved back to the states and ministered in various ways in his local parish and community. He experienced poor health in the last few years of life and moved in to live with his sister. Vincent died in 2000 while walking back to his sister’s home from the florist. Just the day before he died he had asked her if she had ever heard his thanksgiving homily. She laughed and said no. He proceeded to tell her, “When a person says thanks, it is not really a return for something done. You can’t do that. It is an attempt to

return love to love given. Thanks means ‘My love to your love,’” (p. 169). The day after his death, flowers arrived at her home with the message: “Happy mother’s day. My love to your love,” (p. 169).

I believe Vincent **learned what it means to live a life founded on reflecting from the vantage point of the cross, resurrection, and ascension—a life of offering love to God’s great forgiving love—not because our lives are absent of great heartache and pain, but because of the new life and the mysterious and multifaceted peace that Christ offers on a much grander scale than we ever conceive, through and in the very midst of difficulty.** This practice has been most fully realized in my life surrounding my infertility.

After 13 years of multiple unsuccessful attempt to either get pregnant or to adopt, I began to despair. One of the most painful days of my life was August 23, 2016 when our 2 foster boys, Tommy and Mason, went to permanently join another family and their brother. One week later, August 30, Lelin moved in around 11 pm. As many of you know, it was still a long and agonizing process before we got to adopt Lelin. It was not until recently, with some hindsight helped along by the Holy Spirit that I remembered Thanksgiving 2005 with new eyes. This was the year when our family gathered at the Waco house my husband Jose and I had moved into as a newly married couple. Before the meal, a little basket with slips of paper went around the table. Each person took a slip and wrote something they were thankful for. We passed the basket again and played a game of “try-to-guess-who-wrote-what.” “My New Home” was quickly identified as mine. “Grandchildren and Children” was guessed as Grandpa Tom’s. And then there was the one that said “My unborn child.” Everyone looked anxiously around the table, and then eyes landed on me—I was the logical choice at the table to be pregnant since my brother Michael and his girlfriend Amy had only just stated dating, and my mom and grandma just weren’t high on the list of suspects. I was most definitely not pregnant, but Jose had written this as his thanksgiving hope—an anticipation of something yet to come.

I didn’t expect to have married such a prophet, but I realize now that the crucified and risen Christ was working all things together for good (Romans 8:28) during the many years of pain and confusion we experienced and was creating newness and giving birth to hope and possibilities far greater than I

ever imagined, answering Jose's and my deepest prayers. Truly my child is unborn to me, but Lelin is for both Jose and I: "My beloved *unborn child*."

My love to God's love.

My prayer and challenge to you this morning is to *reflect often* and to *reflect deeply*, making devotional reading and bible study a regular activity alongside it. If you, or someone you love, are currently in the middle of grief or cancer or illness or despair, *take heart*. It will be difficult—almost impossible—to fully recognize or see what Christ is doing in and around you right at this moment. But take courage by the testimony of the disciples and others who have found true life, hope, and faith on the other side of their hopelessness and defeat in view of the cross, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Don't get bogged down trying to make sense of it all right now. Be honest about your doubts, fears and pains with God, but meanwhile keep following this confusing and at times infuriating Messiah on his underwhelming donkey into Jerusalem. It is only then that you will meet the Risen Christ—the true King that transforms darkness into LIGHT.

Amen.

* All scripture quotes in this sermon are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)