

Palm Sunday
April 1, 2007

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The Time of Your Visitation from God”

We have just heard the story of Palm Sunday. The story ends with a haunting paragraph found only in the gospel of Luke. “As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.’”

On this holiest of weeks the people in Jerusalem did not recognize God who was visiting them in the most personal and profound way. They were too preoccupied with their own celebrations, their own religious and political agendas, their own lives to recognize the life of God among them. They did not see that in this Jesus was the very love of God. God would not leave one stone unturned until everyone and everything knew and experienced that love. The whole gospel of Luke tells the story of Jesus visitations with all the people.

At our Lenten evening worship services we have sung the prophetic words of Mary, Jesus’ mother to be, that begin to describe the visitation of God through her son. “My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you. You have looked with love on your servant here, and blessed me all my life through. Great and mighty are you, O Holy One, strong is your kindness ever more. How you favor the weak and lowly one, humbling the proud of heart. You have cast the mighty down from their thrones, and uplifted the humble of heart. You have filled the hungry with wondrous things, and left the wealthy no part. Great and mighty are you, O faithful One, strong is your justice strong your love, as you promised to Sarah and Abraham kindness forever more.

Also in the same first chapter of the gospel of Luke when Zechariah’s mouth was opened and his tongue unloosed by the angel he spoke these words about his son John the Baptist and Jesus: “And you child will be called the prophet of the Most High; and you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God... to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

In the very beginning of God’s visitation in Jesus we hear the wonderful news that Jesus came to show God’s love for all people. Jesus came to forgive and save everyone. But the story of the visitation of God’s love does not end with personal salvation. Just as Mary had implied in her prophetic words, Jesus soon began spending time with the forgotten people of his society. He began healing them, preaching God’s good news to them and forgiving their sins. On one occasion he was with over 5,000 who were hungry, so he found a way to feed them all. In all of this he was widely accepted, though religious leaders began to become suspicious of his message and his ministry. They became troubled that Jesus forgave sins as God and began to see it as blasphemy.

But finally he took God's love one step farther. Jesus was not content to just feed the hungry. He asked why so many were hungry. It was that prophetic voice that finally pushed things over the edge. "Great and mighty are you O Holy One, strong is your justice, strong your love." Justice was still another expression of God's love. When Jesus confronted all forms of injustice with God's love the powerful and rich began to notice him. Jesus pointed to them as the cause of injustice. "As he came near and saw the city, where injustice ruled, he wept over it. In the end the powerful thought they had executed him as just another proponent of social justice, another rabble rouser. But the justice Jesus advocated was inspired by the love of God and it was the love of God expressed to those who needed it the most. God's love is not complete unless everyone is completely loved.

I find the journey of Jesus' life and ministry in the gospel of Luke to be remarkably similar to the journey of faith that many of us experience. During our childhood years we attend church and Sunday School and over and over again we hear and experience the unconditional love of God. We're told the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and that through Jesus we are forgiven and saved. We experienced salvation as a gift from God and we grew up in the security of God's love.

As we continue to grow older we experience God's visitation with us in new ways. At our confirmation service we affirm our faith as our own and we promise: to "Continue in the covenant God made with us in our baptism, to live among God's faithful people, to hear God's word and share in God's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ in word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

We go from childhood times of dependence to teen and young adult years of independence. Those are years in which we develop as responsible adults. We develop our expressions of faith convictions. We begin to care about and for others through the resources God has given us and we show that love by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless and more. We hear the good news over and over that we are saved not because we do good works but we do good works because we are already saved and thus free to be part of God's visiting the world with unconditional love and mercy.

But taking the final step of love, the step of the prophet, of asking, "Why?", does not come easy. We find excuses to avoid this final step, perhaps because we know that this is what finally got Jesus into trouble and on this last week of his life, crucified. In this week of all weeks we remember Jesus' words beginning in Luke 9:23, "If any one would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life would lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it."

When Jesus' questions and challenges reached those who were the cause of the problems of the poor and disenfranchised the powerful became upset. His words and ministry took on political overtones because the politicians of his day were the guilty ones. How often do we hear, "The church should not get involved in politics or matters of social justice?"

To all those who will not take the final prophetic step of asking why thousands of children in the world die each day of hunger or disease, or why nations choose war over peace, or why we use up the resources of the earth at record pace with no regard for the future? Those who will not join Jesus in fully visiting the world with God's love find themselves on the wrong end of Jesus prophetic message. "If you, if even you, had only recognized this day the things that make for peace." If you would only remember that, you would remember that you are not saved just for your own sake. Your salvation is a gift and in it you are freed to be a child of God, a follower of Jesus. And this week, of all weeks we see that if we follow Jesus we will be led to a cross. That cross is firmly planted in this world where there is no peace because people forgot to visit that place with the fullness of God's love.

This is a day that is meant to help us walk with Jesus as we begin this Holy Week at Worship on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. George Thompson writes to help us on this journey. "Nearly ten years ago our family attended the Passion Play in the Bavarian village of Oberammergau. This drama has evolved over the centuries, beginning immediately after the catastrophic plague of 1633. The village had been devastated by the many deaths. But throughout the tragedy, they had felt the abiding presence of the spirit of Christ who suffered with his people. The villagers collectively decided that in gratitude to the graciousness of God in sparing their village, they would dramatize the story of Christ's passion, inviting neighboring villagers to be their guests. Visitors now come each ten years from around the globe to witness the presentation.

"One of the most memorable scenes at Oberammergau is the depiction of Palm Sunday. Hundreds of the town's citizens participated in this scene daily for five months. Children were recessed from the village school just in time for the triumphant entry.

"On the day we attended the performance the German kindergarten children had gathered at an outdoor fountain near the sculptured form of a life-sized Jesus upon a donkey. These children danced barefoot in the water and reached over to touch the feet of the statue. In that beatific moment of summer flowers, playful children, and an Alpine paradise I thought: 'Can it get any better than this?'

"As I walked away from that unforgettable setting of grandeur, I suddenly felt the paradox of standing just a few kilometers from Berchtesgaden – once the command center of Hitler's evil empire.

"If there is any hope for this world of bombing raids and human hostility; if there is to be peace in our time; if God's love shall ever preside over the homes of our congregation; if reconciliation between the races shall ever occur in this noble city; it is because a man rode into Jerusalem one day, not to set himself upon a throne, but to enthrone his cross of sacrificial love in the hearts of each of us."

May our hearts be filled with this love of God as God visits us again this year during Holy Week. Amen!