

### “The Heart of the Matter”

The image of journey is important to us at Plymouth. Our very name is derived from the new world destination of the English Separatists who came to be known as the Pilgrims; and a pilgrim is simply someone who is on a religious journey. Our Mayflower forebears were on a journey from a failed relationship with the Church of England toward an unknown future that they trusted would be in God.

Here at Plymouth Church we also like to think of ourselves as works in progress. We agree to differ because that way people don't get all defensive and entrenched in their beliefs. We can learn from one another. As John Robinson, the Pilgrims' pastor said to them, “God hath yet more truth and light to break forth from out [God's] holy word.” In other words, God is still speaking.

A favorite Matins anthem through the years has been *The Journey is Our Home*. Our programs in adult education emerge from our Center for Spiritual Growth because we like the open-ended sound of that. God is not a fixed destination or an enlightenment at which we arrive or an orthodoxy we defend. God is our traveling companion. This has the feel of John Lennon's famous quip, “Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.” We meet God along the way.

The author of the Gospel According to Luke likes the image of journey, too. In fact, nearly half of this gospel has as its setting a single journey that Jesus makes from Galilee to Jerusalem. In chapter nine we read that Jesus, “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” (9:51) and he doesn't arrive there until midway through chapter nineteen (19:29). So ten of Luke's twenty-four chapters take place on this journey: nearly twice as much ink as Luke devotes to the events of Holy Week.

It's on the road that Jesus does some of his most dramatic teaching, including the Lord's Prayer and the parables of the prodigal son and the good Samaritan. And it's not as though throughout this section we have to keep reminding ourselves that we're still on a journey; Luke offers five specific reminders along the way that Jesus is headed toward Jerusalem.

Why the emphasis on travel? Luke isn't the first century Rick Steves. Luke wants us to remember the looming destination of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the economic, political and spiritual heart of God's covenant people. As Matt said this week (one of these days I'll get through a sermon without quoting him—or at least without giving him credit) for Judaism, Jerusalem is New York, Washington DC

and the Vatican all rolled into one. Jerusalem also marks the intersection of two of the greatest achievements of the ancient world: Roman law and Jewish piety.<sup>1</sup>

And most importantly, as anyone with even a passing familiarity with the story of Jesus knows, Jerusalem is where Jesus will be imprisoned, condemned and crucified, and where he will be raised from the dead. Jerusalem is where Jesus will meet his destiny.

As our lesson begins, some Pharisees come to Jesus with a message. This does not bode well, particularly because a couple of chapters earlier Jesus sent the Pharisees a message: “Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.” (11:39) Jesus says, “Woe to you Pharisees!” (11:42) So they’re not likely to be members of his fan club.

Their message sounds like a warning, but it’s really more of a threat: “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” You’d better watch your step. Why don’t you go back to Galilee?

Jesus is unimpressed and undeterred. “Go and tell that fox for me...” “Fox” doesn’t sound as bad as it should. How about “weasel”? “Rat”? “Toad”? “Rodent”? “Animal food trough wiper”? Whatever he is, tell him for me that I’m on the move, all right. “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.” In the Greek it actually says something like, “on the third day I am finished” or “I am made complete.” “On the third day I fulfill my purpose.” Tell Herod I am going right on with my work.

But I am also moving toward Jerusalem. “Yet today, tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way,” not because I am running from that twerp Herod, but “because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” If Herod wants a piece of me, he can find me in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

Why does it have to be Jerusalem? It’s not as though other places don’t have lots of rocks suitable for stoning! But Jerusalem is where the crucial confrontation must take place, because whoever would be redeemed must first be revealed. We can’t be saved from sin we keep secret—particularly sin we keep secret from ourselves. Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem will reveal Jerusalem for what it is. He will unmask its religious hypocrisy, political oppression, petty deal-making and ruthless power. Roman justice and the monuments built to it with their majestic columns gleaming in the sun—all of it is filled with corruption, as we will see when they have a truly innocent prisoner to deal with. And the Temple,

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner said this, in a book I lent to someone and haven’t seen for a very long time so I can’t cite the specific reference. I also seem incapable of writing a sermon without quoting Buechner.

<sup>2</sup> And he does! Luke alone describes a meeting between Herod Antipas and Jesus in Jerusalem. It’s the basis of that memorable song from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, “Oh, so you are the Christ, you’re the great Jesus Christ.” Herod wanted to be King of the Jews like his Daddy, but never rose above Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. See Luke 23:6-12 for this heartwarming tale of Pilate and Herod becoming BFF.

God's footstool, what once was God's holy house is a place of hypocrisy that God hasn't visited in some time: "See, your house is left to you," and look at what a mess you've made of it. Jesus will storm around that Temple from Sunday to Thursday of Holy Week: overturning the tables of the moneychangers, disputing with the religious teachers, avoiding their doctrinal traps and disingenuous questioning, revealing them for who they are.

Whenever human denial is unmasked, what we get is rage. And that tsunami of rage will be unleashed on Jesus. Jesus has to go to Jerusalem because Jerusalem is the heart of God's people. And he has to die not to satisfy some penalty established by a bloodthirsty God, but because he is insistent on telling truths that the sin-sick soul of humanity is intent on denying. As sure as there's gravity, there's going to be a showdown in Jerusalem. A real prophet doesn't dodge the issues that live in Jerusalem. A real prophet heads to the heart of the matter.

Seeing all of this so clearly, how can Jesus not weep for Jerusalem! God sends prophets to call the people back to faithfulness; the religious leaders declare the prophets to be heretics and stone them to death! They presume to denounce prophets for their lack of orthodoxy, turn a deaf ear to the prophets' message and a blind eye to their own corruption. It's a drama that plays out over and over and over again. God is like a mother hen trying to gather her chicks to safety, to call them home, but they insist on scattering every which way. It would be funny if it were not so painfully tragic.

Yes, Jesus will go to Jerusalem... but not until Passover; not until the season when the people are singing that splendid Passover psalm, Psalm 118 with that ringing line, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Then Jesus will bring that psalm to life for them in a way they had never imagined possible. But there's more irony here, of course. For after they have welcomed Jesus with blessings and hosannas on Palm Sunday, when he proceeds to unmask them they will cry out for his blood—as though Jesus were the imposter—these distinguished and powerful self-appointed custodians of justice and truth, who are the real imposters. In the name of the holy and in the name of the rule of law the religious leaders and the Roman authorities will condemn Jesus.

But never forget where this story is really going: God will vindicate Jesus and the truth he brought. God's truth and love will not be mocked in the end. And those who have been revealed can be redeemed. That's the journey Jesus is on.

And it's the journey on which we are called to accompany him: not just to go along for the ride, passively, as spectators; but to go with Jesus to the heart of who we are. This isn't just a story about Jerusalem. It is a story about the human heart that is revealed and unmasked. We are called to journey beneath our polite and pleasant personas to see that we're no different from the people in the Jesus

story. Remember: it's not just Jesus' enemies who do him in, but those who claim to be his followers, his friends! When he gets into trouble suddenly they have trouble recognizing him. When he is a disappointment to them, they turn him in. When the crucial hour comes they fall asleep; and when they wake up they run away.

It's an old, old story that keeps bringing up new and uncomfortable truths we'd rather avoid. We, too, turn a deaf ear to the still speaking God who calls us to share and to sacrifice for the common good. We, too, turn a blind eye to injustice and oppression from which we benefit in a world in which so few have so much and so many have nothing. And we turn a blind eye to the stacked deck in this society that makes a mockery of the freedoms we claim to embody.

We take this journey to painful truth because we must be revealed for who we really are before we can ever hope to discover who God really is; because the God whom we seek is waiting for us where we really live and yearning for us to come home to where we really are... to the truth.

And most profoundly: we are called to take this journey with Jesus because the end of the journey is not an end, after all. It is a beginning.

Amen

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