

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Liberation through Sacrifice”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 20, 2016

Call to Celebration

Many of you know that today is Palm Sunday! The name of this day in the Christian calendar comes from a Bible story. People spread palms in front of Jesus as he entered Jerusalem as a sign of respect. In the Christian tradition, Palm Sunday begins the week that leads up to Jesus' execution on the cross and his return on Easter Sunday. Unitarian Universalists are neutral on the resurrection story, neither requiring belief nor unbelief. We do celebrate that what animated Jesus didn't die but helped regather the community that followed Jesus which had scattered after his arrest. That community is an ancestor of our own religious tradition.

What I'd like to notice, as we begin this morning, about the Palm Sunday story is what the story says happened before he entered the gates of Jerusalem. Standing on the side of the Mount of Olives outside the gates, Jesus wept. This is a little surprising because Jerusalem should have been an awesome site to a person like Jesus who lived most of his life in and around the tiny farming villages of Galilee. They didn't have big cities in Galilee. And for a Jew like Jesus was, seeing the amazing Jewish Temple should have been breath taking.

In those days there were no synagogues or temples in every town. At this time there was only one Temple. The Temple building itself was very small - it could fit inside the infield of any baseball stadium. However, the large structure all around it, the large plaza, the porticos, the columns, the staircases, all of that, were built up by Herod the Great on a monumental scale, filling up, I think something like ten football fields.

But Jesus wept as he looked upon the splendor. Was he thinking about the poverty and suffering where he came from, we might wonder? What is recorded in the Gospel Luke that he says is this:

“If you, Jerusalem, had only known today what could have brought you peace! But now it is hidden from your sight.”

We will be exploring today in the sermon what Jesus knew and didn't know that might have brought peace and saved the Temple and Jerusalem from destruction.

Spoken Meditation

Aramaic Lord's prayer by Neil Douglas-Klotz

(learn it in Aramaic at his web site: <http://abwoon.org/library/learn-aramaic-prayer/>)

O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos

You create all that moves in light.

Focus your light within us—make it useful:

as the rays of a beacon show the way.

Create your reign of unity now—

through our firey hearts and willing hands.

Your one desire then acts with ours,

as in all light, so in all forms.

Grant what we need each day in bread and insight:

subsistence for the call of growing life.

Loose the cords of mistakes binding us,

as we release the strands we hold of others' guilt.

Don't let us enter forgetfulness

But free us from unripeness

From you is born all ruling will,

the power and the life to do,

the song that beautifies all,

from age to age it renews.

Sermon

I wonder what really happened when Jesus entered Jerusalem. He can't have had that many followers traveling with him from Galilee. He might have had some followers in Jerusalem but I'd expect their numbers to be small as he wasn't a regular visitor or teacher there. For him to stage an impressive entrance into Jerusalem with big crowds of people seems unlikely.

There may have been a large crowd of people there for Passover. That crowd may have been drawn to the spectacle. I wonder if maybe a crowd had gathered to honor another

dignitary. Maybe Jesus got there first riding on his borrowed donkey. If so, he might have excited the people near the gates with his parody of a triumphal entrance into Jerusalem of a warrior-king on a magnificent steed. Whatever happened, it makes for a good story with a meaningful message.

What the gospels agree about is Jesus appeared in Jerusalem to criticize the powerful. Clearly, Jesus wanted to announce his presence to the authorities. What scholars tell us is Jesus' behavior is modeled on the tradition of Jewish Prophets. He most likely came to Jerusalem to announce the coming Kingdom or Realm of God on earth. In the tradition of the Jewish Prophets, Jesus was painfully aware of the betrayal of the Jewish people, especially the poor, by the Jewish leaders and by the Roman overlords. In Jesus' eyes, they had broken their covenant with God. They needed to be called back to restore that Covenant. The center of the Jewish universe was the Temple in Jerusalem. The holy days of Passover were a time when the many Jews would be there. It would have been an excellent time to be in Jerusalem to speak prophetically to the powerful.

So what was Jesus' Prophetic message? We find it stated right at the beginning of Luke as Jesus worships in his home town of Nazareth and reads from Isaiah 61:1-2:

The spirit of the Lord is on me,
And anointed me
to bring good news to the afflicted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim a year of jubilee.

These words describe the mission to which Jesus was called, called to announce the Realm of God to be established on Earth. Jesus announced this message not just to recommend this way of being as a hypothetical. He was right there saying it was going to happen very, very soon; within the lifetimes of those hearing his voice. God was sick and tired of the way things were and was going to do something about it. Jesus was, in effect, saying, "Get ready for some big changes folks!"

Jesus knew who was hungry to hear this message. Jesus had been meeting and healing those who were excluded from the Temple by their illnesses that made them unclean. Roman oppression meant that people were being unfairly imprisoned. Jesus knew people who had lost their inherited family land due to being unable to pay heavy Roman and Temple taxes. Farmers couldn't support themselves or their families without any land to grow food. They didn't have progressive income tax nor did they have earned income credit. Pay your taxes ... or perish. A year of Jubilee would forgive all these debts and burdens, allowing people to have a second chance.

So Jesus was on a prophetic mission from God proclaiming an immanent reversal. The high and mighty will brought low and the low shall be lifted up. This reversal will be a blessing to the poor in spirit, to the meek and gentle, to those who mourn, those who are persecuted and those who hunger and thirst for uprightness and righteousness. The merciful, the pure of heart, and the peacemakers will get the recognition they deserve.

And sooner or later, Jesus was going to have to go to Jerusalem to speak this truth to power, maybe even triggering the reversal itself. Yes, he taught and healed as he traveled from town to town, but his primary mission was to proclaim this good news.

So, given his passion for this mission, the question arises, did Jesus go to Jerusalem to do his prophetic duty for the benefit of the suffering Jewish people or did he go anticipating he would be killed then rise again and sit on the right hand of God ready for the last judgement after the apocalypse?

Two of my favorite Biblical scholars think he had hoped to continue his ministry and mission. They think he probably wanted a triumphant exit as well as an entrance from Jerusalem after Passover was complete. Sure, he must have known he was taking great risks by what he was doing, especially turning over the tables of the money changers. Maybe he hoped for and expected a change of heart by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leaders, as happened when Jonah went to confront Nineveh and all the people repented.

Liberal Catholic scholar John Dominic Crossan notes that Jesus was protected by a crowd who came with him from Galilee but also by "others who had invited him to bring his message of God's Kingdom-on-Earth to Jerusalem for maximum publicity precisely at Passover." Every night Jesus would withdraw out of Jerusalem to the

relative safety of an area of supporters on the Mount of Olives and Bethany. Crossan sees in these precautions that:

Jesus was planning, despite those dangerous demonstrations, to leave Jerusalem without getting himself killed. And he almost made it -- until Thursday. (source: [link](#))

Scholar Bart Erhman agrees with Crossan, not expecting that Jesus came to Jerusalem to get killed. The problem was, Jesus wasn't just criticizing the Roman rule. He had some harsh words for:

the Jewish aristocracy and the priests running the Temple cult in Jerusalem. Jesus saw them not as the representatives of God on earth, but as God's enemies. When he arrived in Jerusalem, Jesus proclaimed that God would destroy the Temple and wipe out those who were in control of it (the power players in Jerusalem: the high priest, the chief priests, the Sanhedrin, the Sadducees) (source: [link](#))

I think we can be confident that this didn't make the Jewish authorities friendly to him. They would be happy to hand him over to the Roman authorities for execution if they got the chance. Pilate would have surely seen him as a problem and it takes no stretch of imagination to expect him to crucify Jesus "as a public example of what happens to those who stir up animosity to the ruling authorities."

At some point during Jesus' week in Jerusalem, he must have realized the authorities were planning to capture and kill him. What we have is a story of him in the Garden of Gethsemane, agonizing over the cup of poison that was being handed to him. He could have gone back to Galilee and escaped. He didn't. Whether or not he came to Jerusalem expecting to die, at the moment he allows Judas to kiss him and betray him, he chooses to sacrifice himself for his hoped for liberation of the Jewish people.

Jesus is hardly unique during this period of time putting his life on the line. There were a number of other prophets who appeared and were killed or banished. Jesus was different. Jesus either survived the ordeal (which is highly unlikely), or somehow his spirit or presence or message was able to survive his death that led to the reconstituting of his community that preserved and carried on his mission. Whether or not he physically returns from the dead after three days, his prophecy does not die with his body.

While most Unitarian Universalists embrace the ethical teachings of Jesus, we are suspicious of the idea that Jesus sacrificed his life, the way Jews slaughtered animals in the Temple during those days, to atone for sins. We resist the idea that God can only be reconciled with sinful humanity if Jesus offers his own life up as an atoning sacrifice. Some of us find that kind of an ancient God appeased by the shedding of human blood repugnant.

Here is another way to hear the story of Jesus' sacrifice in the context of the sacrifice of his life for his prophetic mission rather than our personal redemption. Jesus puts his life on the line to show his commitment to that mission. It is a mission that can only go so far during his lifetime, given the Roman occupation of Palestine. But, if his mission outlives him and is taken up again by his disciples and followers, then his death will not be in vain. His hope for the liberation of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized, continues.

So when we recognize and honor Jesus' sacrifice, when we align with Jesus' prophetic mission, he can live again in us and in our actions. We become part of his sacrifice for the liberation of humanity, work far from complete.

That work of liberation remains undone partly because Jesus was wrong. He expected the Realm of God would be established during the lifetime of his disciples. That part of his prophecy is clearly wrong, even disastrously wrong. In the lifetimes of his disciples, things go from bad to worse with the eventual destruction of the Temple by the Romans. God doesn't reverse anything and the Jews suffer *even more* not less afterwards. Jesus' message probably would have disappeared too, except for Saul from Tarsus who stopped persecuting Christians after having Jesus appear to him and question him about that persecution. So much of the Christianity we have today is colored by St. Paul's Romanizing influences to make Christianity attractive to them. (Especially removing the requirement for circumcision)

But his followers didn't give up on the idea that the Realm of God was coming. Christians have been expecting the second coming to be imminent for the last two thousand years. Thanks to Wikipedia, here are some of the more entertaining predictions that haven't come to pass:

- renaeus believed Jesus would return in the year 500. One prediction was based on the dimensions of Noah's ark.
- Pope Sylvester II expected the Millennium Apocalypse at the end of the Christian Millennium, January 1, 1000. Various Christian clerics predicted the end of the world on this date.
- Mathematician Michael Stifel calculated the Judgement Day to arrive on October 19, 1533 at 8am.
- Emanuel Swedenborg thought it had actually happened during his lifetime in 1757 except that it had happened in the spiritual world. He also believed he had daily visions of Jesus over the course of 30 years. Jesus' return was not in the flesh, but in His Holy Spirit.
- The most recent failed expectation was September 28, 2015 by Mark Biltz when there was a lunar eclipse. This comes from the [Blood Moon Prophecy](#) of John Hagee.

If you'd like to mark your calendar for the next prediction, psychic Jeane Dixon thinks it could happen as early as 2020.

I say, don't bother. Jesus was wrong about predicting the coming Realm of God as a moment in time. What Jesus might not be wrong about is he participated in initiating a change in consciousness about how people should treat each other that is gradually changing the world.

Unitarian Universalist values as written into our Principles align well with the essentials of Jesus' vision of the Realm of God. Jesus' radical and uncompromising love we express in our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of all people. Jesus' demand for justice we express in our call for justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Jesus' vision of world transformation we show through our goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

These values are not just found in Unitarian Universalism but also today in contemporary Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and other world religions as well as earth centered traditions.

And still the work of liberation initiated by Jesus' sacrifice isn't done.

So as this holy week begins, may we reflect on how Jesus' prophetic mission has touched our lives and moved us. If we are so moved by him, may we align with the good news he claimed from fellow prophet Isaiah. I'll close by repeating the verses:

The spirit of the Lord is on me,
And anointed me
to bring good news to the afflicted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim a year of jubilee.

Benediction

Go out with [these words](#) by Dag Hammarskjöld,

“Forgiveness breaks the chain of causality because he who 'forgives' you--out of love--takes upon himself the consequences of what you have done. Forgiveness, therefore, always entails a sacrifice.

The price you must pay for your own liberation through another's sacrifice is that you, in turn, must be willing to liberate in the same way, irrespective of the consequences to yourself.”