

“Look to where you stand”

Mark 11: 1-11

Palm Sunday

March 29, 2015

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The Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy week is a story told by all four gospel writers in the New Testament. We can take that as a signal that this story is central to who the early followers of Jesus understood him to be and should be central to what we know about Jesus. Each of the four Gospels tells the story a little differently. This year the story comes to us via Mark, the shortest and most energetic of the four gospels.

In the spirit of this spare writer – Mark repeatedly uses words like “immediately” and _____ to keep the story moving at a brisk clip, and he manages to tell stories that have shaped centuries of Christian faith with a couple sentences here and there – so in the spirit of the one who skips right past the early life of Jesus and jumps into the wilderness, in that spirit I’m gonna jump right into telling where this is going.

Today, in the spring of 2015, I think the Triumphal Entry story is teaching us something about how we face our fears and ride straight into the dark parts of our lives that terrify us.

By the time this story comes to us in Mark, Jesus has already sat his disciples down three times and lectured them on the suffering and death he was about to face. They of course don’t get it. [Mark paints the disciples as remarkably slow to catch onto what was happening around them. He does this while also telling the reader at the very beginning who Jesus is: this is the story of the Son of God. So Mark sets up a tension between the unknowing of the disciples versus the clear recognition by the reader of who Jesus is.] But that is all another story. The point for today is that Jesus knows he is walking into fire, yet he models a way of proactive, deliberate and openness in facing what was likely his greatest fear. Riding on that donkey amidst the crowds of Passover pilgrims, Jesus showed us how to move toward the dark and scary places of our lives with grace, dignity and courage. He did it without any hint of worldly power. He rode in at eye-level true to himself come what may. In this story Jesus shows the readers how he will face all that will come to him through the course of the coming days, all that we recognize and honor throughout Holy Week; the Triumphal Entry is a celebration of the courageous but serving spirit Jesus will bring to all of it.

Recently Lancaster Theological Seminary (LTS) hosted a panel discussion of alumni and faculty who had been active in the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 60s. Four elderly white men flanked the retired Episcopal Bishop Nathan Baxter and told stories and memories of that era here in Lancaster.

The first person on the panel told of traveling to Mississippi to help register black voters. Sitting in a pew listening to his story a week ago, from my vantage point of personal safety it was hard to wrap my head around the level of danger these men were willing to risk for this prophetic work. But I remember him saying something like, “We were scared because we didn’t know then how this story would end. In the middle of it, we didn’t know how it would all turn out.” It could have gone either way for them.

One story sticks out to me. One of the men, the Rev. Paul Irion, was on faculty at that time and recalled a faculty meeting to decide what to do about participating in the march from Selma to Montgomery. They voted to send a delegation; Irion, and several students joined in the march representing LTS. He told of stopping at a lunch counter for snacks on their ride home without incident. But they learned later that just a few minutes after their departure a delegation from the seminary in nearby Gettysburg stopped at the same lunch counter. That group was confronted by an angry “group of ruffians,” in the words of the storyteller, who beat some of them up. A faculty member of that group had a chair broken over his back. As Irion told his story I sat in awe thinking of the risks these people of faith were willing to take for the sake of justice, and the prophetic vision of a faculty committed to being represented in the march.

In the same way, earlier this year *The Mennonite* published a story about Vic Stoltzfus and Lawrence Burkholder each participating in Civil Rights activities in the 1960s. Both men would go on to become presidents of Goshen College, but risked their lives – one as a Freedom Rider and one to march from Selma to Montgomery. Stoltzfus, who marched with MLK, John Lewis and others, recounts a sobering detail that shows how dangerous it was for even a white man to join in the movement: then in his 30s and married with young children, he signed up for a life insurance policy for the first time before making the journey to Selma.

For these men, and of course for the thousands of African-American men and women who took to the streets to join in the movement, these acts were of course political. They were also personal. And scary.

So was Jesus’ journey into Jerusalem. It was political and personal and scary.

This week Jess and I watched the recent film, *The Theory of Everything* – the story of Stephen Hawking and his first wife Jane and his terrifying journey with a motor neuron disease. It is, for the most part, a story of two people who choose over and over to face their fears head on and step into a journey full of pain and uncertainty. Of course, the reason there is a story to tell is because Hawking is one of the most famous scientists of our time, and has continuously overcome unimaginable physical odds to make profound contributions to our understanding of the universe.

But what pulled me through the film was all the scenes of Stephen and Jane facing what seemed like the end – the end of their relationship, the end of his academic career, the end of his ability to walk or speak, possibly the end of his life – and somehow they would walk with courage and dignity through what looked like impossibilities.

The film begins with Stephen at Cambridge as a geeky physics student. He rather stumbles into a relationship with Jane. It doesn’t take long to be charmed into rooting for the young couple, only to suddenly begin seeing signs of Stephen’s illness. After he collapses on campus he gets a diagnosis as a young 20-something that inevitably will end in the loss of most of his motor functions, including his ability to walk and even speak. He draws in on himself and though we as viewers knew that was not the end of the story, in that moment looking in on a reclusive college student holed up in his room it was easy to join in his feelings that this was the end of his relationship with Jane and his prospects as a scientist.

At that point, Jane is the one who single-handedly pulls him out of despair and helps chart a new path back to academic success. I found myself on the edge of tears as the scene unfolds of this young man stumbling with a cane and already slurred speech into his doctoral defense. He stands before a team of scholars and verbally defends his groundbreaking research.

Now this is a good time to stop and admit that I knew very little about Stephen Hawking's story before watching the film and it doesn't take a very prolonged Google search to realize the film takes liberties with some of his story. And in the words of one reviewer, had the film followed more closely the memoir it was based on, Stephen would have come off as a "narcissistic jerk." So there's that.

But the film is a profound reminder that so many people have stories of moving through fear and suffering with humility and courage as they journey with physical disease and disability. Like Jesus, these stories show us how to move toward the dark and scary places of our lives with grace, dignity and courage.

And then there's Mennonite pastor Max Villatoro. You might recall that Susan recently circulated a petition appealing Mr. Villatoro's arrest by immigration officials. Despite a nationwide effort of support, he was deported to Honduras a little over a week ago.

Mr. Villatoro, an undocumented immigrant, was an active pastor in Iowa City with four children at home. He has a criminal record for a couple nonviolent offenses when he was in his 20s over 15 years ago. But he has grown up since then and become a leader in his Mennonite community. Referencing President Obama's instruction to immigration officials to deprioritize deportations for those who are not risks to national security and do not pose a danger to society, one supporter of Mr. Villatoro said, "I can't imagine anybody who's more deserving of discretion and falls within the exception to the enforcement priorities."¹

What journey with fear and danger is Mr. Villatoro on? May he too find strength to ride into fear with courage, grace and dignity.

Tea house...

Sometimes, like those LTS faculty and alumni who shared stories about taking risky action for racial justice, sometimes the places that scare us are destinations of our own choosing.

Sometimes, like Stephen in *The Theory of Everything*, or pastor Max, sometimes the places that scare us are places we are forced to endure.

¹ Elise Foley, "Iowa Pastor Max Villatoro Deported After Community Rallies To Keep Him In U.S.," on the *Huffington Post* (Mar. 20, 2015). Online at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/20/max-villatoro-deported-_n_6911610.html. Accessed Mar. 27, 2015. See also, Anna Groff, "Iowa pastor detained by ICE," on the news blog of *The Mennonite* (Mar. 4, 2015). Online at: <https://themennonite.org/daily-news/iowa-pastor-detained-by-ice/>. Accessed Mar. 27, 2015.

What are the scary, dark corners you face? How will you face your fears?

This Palm Sunday we can celebrate that Jesus rides before us, despite all fears, he models journeying with courage and grace and dignity.

May this Holy Week be a journey – whether it is an inward journey or an outward journey – may you follow the risen living one with a spirit of grace and courage come what may.