

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Passion/Palm Sunday, April 17, 2011
Lessons: Zephaniah 3:1-4,11-15,19-20 and Matthew 21:6-17

NO ONE SHALL MAKE THEM AFRAID

In his famous book, *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau wrote these often quoted words: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” I hear it all around me, and I fear greatly that we are systematically consigning our younger generations to lives of disappointment, frustration, and promise denied. We have become a society wasting many of its people. Quality, what is that? Just make a fast buck. Designing and crafting something well and taking pride in its quality have been replaced by marketing pretty junk with fancy features that will no longer matter when the junk has broken much too soon. Our discarded “goods” are turning earth into a junkyard. People resign themselves to un-fulfilling jobs, escapist entertainments, failing relationships, and what they call the rest of their lives. Why do so many relationships fail? There is no single answer, of course, and maybe some of us in the older generations shake our heads and cite a lack of commitment, but I think what is lacking sometimes is not commitment but hope. What some may see as lack of courage is really people’s crushed belief in themselves and their own possibilities. Hope is the force that enables us to risk ourselves, open ourselves to life and other people, take a chance on real love, and stick with it, but such hope requires belief in oneself.

How those words, belief in ourselves, have frightened Christianity, but it’s time to admit that, yes, we went too far in our zeal to make God everything and ourselves nothing. Rightly denying that we have any grand virtue by which we might persuade God to grant us salvation, we wrongly denied also that we have any real worth. If indeed we had no worth, why would God have bothered sending Jesus at all, let alone having the beloved Son ride that donkey toward his own humiliation and torturous death? Why? In a fit of theological conceit, we have said God did it all for God’s own glory. Nonsense. Do we really think God is the supreme egomaniac? There is, of course, a kernel of truth in such theology, but it is so phrased and developed that we miss its truth and dutifully embrace its falsehood. Glory? God’s glory is self-giving love, and that glory will be fulfilled when long-loved humanity finally responds with love in return and we show our love for God in the way we treat each other.

We have made heaven sound so boring! Who wants to stand around all day forever chanting, “Holy, holy, holy”? And do we really think God is so dull-witted as to be pleased with such ever-droning praise?

God loves us, which means God sees something in us God deems worth loving. No, we cannot earn it; neither can we enhance our worth by trying to prove ourselves better than other people. Love is love, not reward, and so cannot ever be earned or deserved. That's the truth we have fought to preserve, and rightly so; otherwise we fall back into competitive religion and virtue and so become proud and self-righteous rather than humble and compassionate. But unless we think God is absurd, we need to grant ourselves the simple truth that being loved so greatly by God confers upon us, not only the right, but the requirement for a sense of self-worth and self-respect that has nothing to do with haughtiness, religious snobbery, or a self-congratulating sense of superiority.

Let me come at this crucial understanding a slightly different way. Evil creates nothing but only twists and corrupts what God created to be good. Even poisons found in nature can be used as medicines for healing. So, pride with a happy, thankful sense of self is not evil. To be loved by God is to be worth something. To be given life by God is to be granted promise of life to be realized and fulfilled; it is to be made with hope. Everything hurtful and evil is a corruption of something made to be good. We can become arrogant because God gave us the capacity to feel good about ourselves. We can be cruel because God gave us the ability to be intentionally kind and receptive to each other's kindness. We can torture because we can hug and feel the hug we could not feel if we were invulnerable men and women of steel. We suffer from each other's scorn because God made us to need each other's support and respect. Even guilt and shame – the very feelings we hate so much and associate so strongly with sin – come from our God-given capacity to care about the way our actions affect each other and the kind of people they make us. We need to make people proud of us. We need a sense of accomplishment. Knowing we are loved gives us the context for life, not the realization of our potential. Being loved, we need to make, build, write, paint – whatever – to work and strive and accomplish. God gave us our varied capacities to be doers and builders of different kinds with different skills, planners and designers of all sorts, and God made that capacity varied so we would need each other and work together in mutual respect. All of this world's engines of destruction, whether by warfare or economic expansion and enslavement, are corruptions of our God-given drive to build and accomplish. Evil has nothing of its own, and in the end, it will have nothing at all.

The Gospel of Matthew makes it very clear that Jesus is fulfilling prophecy as the one sent by God. This time, however, he fulfills a prophecy openly and dangerously by riding that donkey into the city of Jerusalem, and the people's responses show they understand him to be presenting himself as the promised Messiah. So, the die is cast, and the opposition will respond with animosity increasing to deadly force. Palm Sunday is for me a day of confusion, contradiction, and very mixed feelings. On one hand, God is faithful and keeps the promise. On the other hand, Jesus is bound to be rejected, and so he rides humbly but boldly into a firestorm for which he is striking the match.

Ah, soiled, defiled, oppressing city! It has listened to no voice; it has accepted no correction. It has not trusted in the LORD; it has not drawn near to its God. The officials within it are roaring lions; its judges are evening wolves that leave nothing until the morning. Its prophets are reckless, faithless persons; its priests have profaned what is sacred, they have done violence to [God's teaching].

So Jesus drives the money changers and merchants out of the Temple but accepts the joy of children who echo their parents' fragile hopes for a day of deliverance. Hosanna! – *Save us! Be our Savior!* It's easy to get children to celebrate; they scarcely need a cause because they love just doing it and being happy and excited. But underneath their excitement is not only their parents' deepest longings but God's own longing for a day when arrogance and haughtiness are gone and a humble people can live with self-respect and mutual respect, without fear. I chose that promise from Zephaniah for the title of my sermon because so many millions of people in this world cannot even imagine how it would feel or how it could ever actually come to pass: "and no one shall make them afraid."

Right now, children are hiding in fear, and adults are covering in shadows of one kind or another. Some are literally and outwardly cringing from the threat of harm or even death; others are going through the day in an outwardly very businesslike manner, keeping their cool, while suppressing the dread that hovers over their souls in their quiet desperation.

God did not send Jesus for nothing, and Jesus did not go to the cross just to start a religion or promise us no more than something better somewhere else someday. God intends to have a people who will be humble, not humiliated; who will respect themselves and others, not build themselves up by putting others down; who will be empowered by trust and hope; and who, knowing themselves loved by God, will be liberated to love each other.

God is faithful, and God has refused to give up on us, no matter how great the cost of continuing to love us. Therefore, we have hope, and we can hold on to that hope because it will not let go of us even if our grip slips. And that's a promise Jesus has sealed with his own blood. Amen.