

## **Sermons at St. Luke's**

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, April 17, 2011.*

(Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66)

On this Palm Sunday, the Sunday of our Lord's Passion, I'd like to tell you a fable. Once upon a time, there was a bird who was stubborn. One year as winter was approaching, the stubborn bird decided, "I'm not going to migrate this year. I've had enough of migrating. Nobody's actually ever stuck around long enough to see how bad winter is. I bet it's not as bad as they say. You all go on ahead. I'm going to stay here." And so the other birds headed south, and the stubborn bird felt pretty good about itself for a couple weeks until it started to get cold. And then it got really cold, and then the bird decided that it had made a mistake and that it should fly south after all if it was to survive. So it started heading southward and it made pretty good progress, because like I said, it was a stubborn bird. So it stubbornly pressed on until finally its wings would move no more, and it began to plummet downward and downward and downward and it made a rough landing in a farmer's field, and it laid there frozen. And now the bird began to feel sorry for itself, "I'm going to die here. If I'd just listened to my friends. If I'd just done what everybody was else was doing. Why did I have to be so stubborn?" And as it was sitting there feeling sorry for itself, a cow wandered through the field. And the cow stopped right over the bird, and as cows will do, it left a little something there on top of the bird -- actually it was a lot of something on top of the bird. And the bird was now angry, "Great! Not only am I going to die, but I'm going to die covered in this filth." But the thing about the stuff that comes out of cows is that it's warm. And after a few minutes, the bird began to feel sensation returning to its body, and it said to itself, "I'm going to live! I'm going to live!" And it started to sing at the top of its voice, "I'm going to live!" It was so busy celebrating that it didn't notice the farmer's cat which had heard its singing at the top of its voice and stalked up silently and pounced on the bird, and that was the end of that bird.

Now, this story has two morals. The first moral is this: The right pile of manure at the right time may save your life. Now, think about it. How many times have you been in a -- quote, unquote -- pile of manure only to realize later that it was that very experience that taught you what you needed to know. The second moral is this: If you find yourself saved by a pile of manure, beware of celebrating too soon lest you lose everything.

Now, you're probably wondering why I tell this story on Palm Sunday. Well, frankly, Palm Sunday, the Sunday of our Lord's Passion, stinks. The story of the betrayal, the humiliation, the crucifixion of our Lord can make us feel like we are covered in manure as we hear the recounting of human folly, human weakness and cruelty. At first the crowd hails Jesus as a king with cries of "Hosanna," but we see the crowd's foolishness as their cheers turn to shouts of "Crucify him! Let him be crucified!" This is just a big mess. Even doing liturgy on Palm Sunday can be a big mess, as we've discovered this morning trying to bring two liturgies together. We witness Jesus' best friends falling asleep on him, deserting him, denying they even know him. Jesus is taunted, spit upon, beaten and ultimately hung like a disobedient slave on a cross to die a tortuous

suffocating death. I could use all kinds of words I dare not repeat from the pulpit to describe this. I think we get the point when I say it feels like a pile of manure.

Part of the reason why it feels so disgusting is because we know that the story is not just in the past. We're still fickle, claiming to side with God one minute and then turning completely away from God the next. We know our own capacity for denial when we're afraid. Like Peter, there are times when we hear ourselves saying, "I don't know what you're talking about" instead of taking a risk to stand up for our faith or to help a persecuted neighbor. This is a messy story, but it can also warm our cold souls. It can restore feeling to a numb heart. It can remind us that although we live in a world where you-know-what happens, where our stubbornness lands us in trouble, we serve a God who is willing to be right there with us in that pile. Christ allowed himself to be the object of our filthy treatment of each other, and he revealed God's power to love.

Today as we remember the Passion, I think we are in the right pile at the right time. But we beware of celebrating too soon. We may rush to comprehend the mystery and power of God's love. We may gloss over our own profound failure to love, and if we rush too quickly to Easter and its good news, we risk being pounced upon like the bird by the cat by our own self confidence. Oh, yes, we say to ourselves, we've heard the Passion story. We now understand what Jesus did for us. Thank you, Jesus! We understand God's love for us now. Can we have Easter already? My friends, we need to take our time before getting out of this mess.

The bird's life was saved by being in a pile of manure, but it never got the chance to fly again because it celebrated too soon. It takes time and humility to know the freedom Christ promises us. It takes time and humility to learn how to fly again after being grounded by our own stubbornness and sin. So this Holy Week, we need to give ourselves some time to carefully remember Jesus' last meal with his friends, his washing of their feet, his dark night in the garden, his betrayal, humiliation and death on the cross, his rest in the tomb.

Jesus was obedient, Paul tells us, even to death on the cross, and Holy Week is our time to be obedient and follow Christ, follow his story, as unpleasant and messy as it may be. You may know that the word "obedience" comes from the Latin meaning "to listen." Obedience this Holy Week means listening again and again. It means praying with the prophet Isaiah that God might waken our ears to listen as those who are taught. Obedience means asking for grace, that as we listen, we might begin to believe. Believe how our failures have paralyzed us, believe how Christ joins us in bondage in order to set us free, believe that Christ extends the warmth of God's forgiveness in the midst of our mess. Warmth that can slowly penetrate our frozen hearts.

As we gather today, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, we slowly sense that while we often deserve the mess we are in, we will not be in it forever. The stench will not overpower us. The waters of baptism at the Easter Vigil promise a cleansing. Distortion and death will not have the final word. But for now, we do not celebrate, we listen. We obediently listen and ask for grace and forgiveness. We listen and we hope.