

“Spellbound by What We’ve Heard”
 delivered Sunday, March 28, 2010
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 Luke 19:28-42, 47-48
 Palm Sunday

The people were *spellbound* by what they heard. If you look that word – spellbound – up in a thesaurus, you find words filled with emotion and passion like – enthralled, caught up, fascinated, gripped, and mesmerized. The original Greek word carries that same sort of intense emotion, with an added connotation of showing devotion – it means that – toward Jesus they were attentive, and they hung on to his every word. (1)

Well, what words were they hanging on to, exactly? Was it the words to his friends giving specific directions to find the colt that had never been ridden? Or the words he spoke in anger to the Pharisees about the crowds, saying, “If they were silent, the very stones would shout out”? Or was it the words he whispered through his own tears, as he looked out over the city and wept, saying, “If you only recognized the things that make for peace...”? What words of Jesus had them spellbound that day?

The gospel writer, Luke, gives us a clue to answer that question which is easy to miss when you read the gospel just a few verses at a time. Here on this high holy day of Palm Sunday, did you notice that there is an echo in this story of something we have heard before? There is a song repeated in this Palm Sunday text that we hear every year on Christmas Eve, when we gather with hope and joy and longing for the very near presence of the living God. On Christmas Eve the angels sing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace...” And today, that very same chorus is taken up by Jesus’ followers who sing, “Peace in heaven, and glory to God in the highest heaven.” It’s the same song with a simple reversal. The angels sing of peace on earth; the Palm Sunday crowd sings of peace in heaven.

This is what biblical scholars call an *inclusio* – it’s a sort of verbal parenthesis around a larger block of scripture that means: when what was said at the beginning is repeated at the end, all that falls in between is of significance as a whole. By putting this song from the birth of Jesus, here at the end of his life, Luke tells us exactly what has the people spellbound. What had the people enthralled, caught up, mesmerized was his whole life. Since the day of his birth, his adolescent outburst in the Temple at the age of 12, and through all his grownup years of teaching and healing, story telling and imparting wisdom – we have been spellbound by what we have heard.

This is why Palm Sunday is the moodiest day of the Christian year – because this whole incredible life of Jesus is about to come to an end, and Jesus’ words that have had us spellbound from the beginning are about to cease. The joyful sounds of “All Glory, Laud and Honor,” the children processing, the congregation singing, everybody waving palm branches, happy to be here because it’s the Prelude to Easter – none of it can muffle the sound of the low rolling drumbeat of impending doom. A whole, wonderful, hopeful, mesmerizing life is coming to an end. That’s why here at the beginning of Holy Week, the gospel writer Luke drops a three month old Christmas card in the path of Jesus as he rides down from the Mount of Olives: Glory to God in the highest heaven, and in heaven, peace...

“Luke wants us to know that these words we so happily send to one another at Christmas come with a Good Friday price. The words sung at Jesus’ birth are now marking his path to the

cross. The angels' song of "Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth! Good will to all people!" was not merely a birth announcement, but a set of marching orders to which Jesus was obedient throughout his life," Professor Tom Long writes. "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he did so as a king, but his royalty was not pomp and power but humble obedience...knowing that violence awaited him at the journey's end. In obedience he traveled along the way, eating with sinners, and remaining faithful to God's desire to gather the rejected and the lost. Then he entered the city to make peace with the offering of his own life. To live the Christian life is to assume the pattern of Jesus' obedience, to allow "Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth! Good will to all people!" to become a drumbeat marking our steps along the pilgrim way. For Jesus, obedience meant carrying the cross; for most of us, it means lifting a thousand little and daily crosses of our many relationships." About the odd and rather strangely detailed instruction regarding the donkey? It is "one last story of the disciple's small obedience performed under the canopy of Jesus great and life-long obedience. In the securing of the colt, they do as they are told and in so doing, the small and tattered strands of their lives are woven into the great story of redemption." (2)

This is the grace of remembering the Christmas angels here at the end of Jesus' life: their song, and our Palm Sunday echo of it, invite us to think about how we have responded to his whole life and to the things that have kept us spellbound. For the truth of the matter is that from today on we cannot go any further with him. We cannot bear his suffering to the cross; as the American spiritual sings it, "He had to walk that lonesome valley by himself." If his own disciples betrayed him and fell asleep and denied him, there is no way we can walk any further with him. But, according to this gospel, we can look back over his lifetime, and remember something he said along the way that called forth in us a desire to obey.

What did Jesus say to you that caused you to follow him? Was it his very first sermon about bringing good news to the poor? Was it, "your sins are forgiven, your faith has made you well, stand up and go your way?" Was it, "once upon a time a man was left beaten in a ditch, and while others passed by someone stopped and bandaged his wounds, and made sure he got the care he needed. Go and do likewise."? Was it, "Do not worry about your life... consider the lilies of the field, how they grow, they neither toil nor spin...how much more will God care for you?" Was it, "Rejoice with me, for the sheep, for the coin, for the Prodigal...for I have found what was lost."?

There is no way any one of us can follow in Jesus' footsteps this Holy Week to the very end. This week is about his obedience, not ours. But look back over his whole life and remember what he said that left you spellbound, and just like those two who went and fetched the donkey, know that your obedience – to something he said – means "the small and tattered strands of your life are woven into the great story of redemption." Today is not just about the week to come. It's about a life that began with a chorus of angels in heaven, finding an echo in our praise and in the living of our days.

Anyone who has ever been part of a downtown, urban congregation knows that sometimes the lines get blurry between being church and being Christian. When a church is located in a place where your immediate neighbors are the homeless, the unclean, the mentally ill and the rejected, you live in this tension between offering hospitality to strangers – as Jesus calls us – and being a place where not everyone off the street feels welcomed. But there are moments when the line between the congregation and the people on the street disappears. It happened during Holy Week at an Episcopal church near the one I served in downtown Atlanta.

The tradition of All Saints Episcopal is to host a dramatic reading of the passion story. That particular year the Narrator was great, Jesus knew his lines perfectly. Peter was cast as a cowardly lion. Pilate carried the ironic intonation of one boasting of power, yet with little real power. Then the part came when Pilate said what he says every year: What do you want me to do with this man? The whole congregation knew very well their cue and yelled back, “Crucify him, crucify him!” to blood-curdling effect. And while the crowd’s pretended rage was still ringing in their ears, a part not called for in the script came bellowing from about two-thirds back in the pews: “No.... No....No....not my Boy. No...Don’t....Not my Boy.” Then a woman’s sobs were throbbing through the air to break your heart.

The priest who remembers this moment in writing, Martha Sterne, looks back saying, “We were appalled. What had been an audience had become something else...Somehow 400 observers were transformed into a body of witnesses.” She craned her neck to see that someone sitting near the woman was comforting her. They looked for all the world like Jesus’ mother Mary and John lost at the foot of the cross, her head collapsed on the shoulder of her pew-mate. She writes, “Perhaps you would have diagnosed her as mentally ill or maybe drunk – but she was there at the foot of the cross... and she had taken us there too.” (3)

Who else would have known, quite like Mary, that what kept them all spellbound in those last days was not just the final parade, or the blessing and breaking of bread, or the last words even, but rather his whole life. Who else would have known, quite like Mary, that it was his life – between the angels’ peace on earth and the people’s peace in heaven that has kept all of us spellbound. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Thanks to Chandler Stokes, the Greek scholar of our Moveable Feast preaching seminar for his insight into the meaning of this word in Greek.
- 2) Tom Long, “Living the Word,” *The Christian Century*, March 21-28, 2001, p. 13.
- 3) Martha Sterne, *Alive and Loose in the Ordinary*, p. 23.