



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Journey to the Promised Land

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It seems hard to believe that this is Holy Week and that today is Palm Sunday. Equally hard to believe that this is Passover, with its promise that God's chosen people would be saved from the plagues set upon Pharaoh. Spring is here, but her promise seems cruelly fleeting: set just outside our doors, which remain shut to a plague in our own time. Easter is coming and yet seems so far away.

In the Easter story of course, Jesus brings his message of radical redemption to the promised land of Jerusalem, the land of his ancestors, the land promised and given by God to Abraham. Jesus rides in on a donkey, as prophesied in the Hebrew Bible Zechariah 9:9: "... your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey." The donkey is significant for other reasons as well; donkeys are not horses, they are more humble, signifying that the kingdom Jesus proclaimed was not an earthly or political one. And at least Jesus rode the donkey and not the other way around:

An old man and a little boy on a donkey were on their way into town. They passed by a group of people who said, "What a shame for that old man to be walking while that perfectly able-bodied boy rides that donkey."

So the boy got off the donkey and the old man got on. They later passed by some more people who said, "Why should that little boy have to walk when they have a donkey to ride on."

So the little boy got on the donkey and they both rode it. After a while, they passed some more people. They overheard the people say, "That poor donkey must be wore out from carrying both of them."

So the little boy and old man picked up the donkey and started to carry it. They were carrying the donkey across a bridge. The weight of the donkey became just too unbearable and slipped from their grasp and went over the side of the bridge into the water and drowned.

The moral of the story is- If You Try To Please Everyone You'll Eventually Lose Your ASS!

However that came to pass, Jesus rode into the promised land on Passover across a road strewn with palms to signify his royalty. Imagine the poignancy of hundreds of poor Palestinian Jews lining the dusty road into Jerusalem shouting "Hosanna" -- literally "save us!" -- to a gaunt young man seated on a donkey riding straight-faced into the center of the city, eyes set with firm determination to face his death. His donkey rode across a road of palm leaves (thus today Palm Sunday) a traditional sign of royal honor meant to lessen the dust of the road. Here was the 'messiah' -- literally the anointed one -- who would bring forth the kingdom of God on earth. It had been a long journey but the end, while in the promised land, did not hold the promise Jesus had hoped for.

Jesus brought a new message of redemption and with it an early religious movement bent on reversing the social order: the first shall be last and the last shall be first. He proclaimed that the kingdom of God was coming to earth, "like the son of man on the clouds of heaven," meaning for everyone. We too often jump to the later Christian understanding of a harsh and punishing God who sends babies to hell because they have not been washed in the blood of Jesus, but the early Christian movement and the Christianity that I believe is being resurrected is very different.

But Jesus had another kingdom in mind rather than the overthrow of the Roman garrisons. His was the promised land of God's love, his Abba in Aramaic, literally Daddy. The rest of the story that is the Holy week is known to most of us. Jesus ultimately faced the hypocrisy of his (or any other age), turning over the money-changers tables, he was arrested, accused and crucified. The Romans killed Jesus as a political enemy of the state. Simple as that. Then what happens?

Well, this is what separates the historical Jesus from the Jesus the Christ. Some say he was resurrected, some say buried in an unmarked grave, still others say he ran off with Mary Magdalene and started a royal family in the south of France. In any case, the problem was that he was dead and gone. What had gone wrong, his followers might have asked? Wasn't he supposed to be the one, the Messiah, the prophet of this new promised land? Dejected, anxious of further persecution, his disciples left Jerusalem after the Holy week and headed for home, back to the hills of Galilee, to their fishing to their work, their lives, and yet they knew they would never be the same. Perhaps the promised kingdom, the new promised land would not come to pass.

But isn't now that this kingdom, this new promised land might be coming into reality? Could we be on our own journey to our promised land?

What is the promised land anyway? It could be as radical as the last shall be first. But I think it doesn't need to be that revolutionary. I believe that it has something to do with Dr. King's Beloved Community; a place and a time where the lowly are restored to some semblance of safety and dignity. A time when the most vulnerable among us are cared for.

This pandemic has laid bare the atrocious state of our health care system and the gaping holes in our social safety net. And believe me, when the wealthy and the middle class can't get a ventilator to save their lives, that promised land becomes more than rhetorical.

I always wondered what Trump meant in his first inaugural speech that "This American *carnage* stops right here and stops right *now*". Most of us looked at one another and thought what is he talking about? What Trump meant is hard to say, except that intentionally or not he was pointing to an existential crisis in American life. Even before this pandemic, white men without college degrees were dying. Not just of overdose – the opiate problem is the means not the cause of this despair – but from obesity and all its related illnesses, diabetes, heart disease, pulmonary failure, alcoholism. Poor people of color were dying from these disease but white people, especially middle-aged men without college degrees are dying at an increasing rate. This was something Trump had tapped into – the despair which lives at the heart of the disposed in global economy that leaves behind wide swaths of America. As the Princeton economists Ann Case and Angus Deaton observed in their latest book Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism:

"Outside of wars or pandemics, death rates for large populations across the world have been consistently falling for decades. Yet working-age white men and women without college degrees were dying from suicide, drug overdoses, and alcohol-related liver disease at such rates that, for three consecutive years, life expectancy for the U.S. population as a whole had fallen" (As quoted in The New Yorker March 20, 2020)

The promised land it seems is nowhere to be found in a world that was racing by those without employment and without hope. Not too unlike the poor peasants who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday; people with little hope and little means desperate for a savior that will bring them to the promised land.

While the pandemic has thrown so many more out of work, it has also highlighted what we might have missed. Capitalism runs on the lives of the expendable and that reality is

being thrown into sharp relief. Stop people from working and you stop the capitalist machine. Would it possible to see the promised land of meaningful employment after this pandemic is over? Perhaps. For the first time since the Great Depression policy makers are suggesting a government-sponsored infrastructure program similar to the New Deal: jobs to rebuild our nation's roads, sewers, and public places from the decay that capitalistic decadence and an aversion to fair taxes have left behind. Ironically, then candidate Trump, flirted with this idea. Perhaps the pandemic will nudge us towards that promised land. Perhaps. At the very least, though painful, the journey of this pandemic has shown as MLK said "We may have come on different ships but we are in the same boat now." Can I get an amen?

As a letter - falsely attributed to Bill Gates yet wise nonetheless -- put it:

The Covid-19 Virus is reminding us "that we are all equal, regardless of our culture, religion, occupation, financial situation or how famous we are. This disease treats us all equally, perhaps we should too. If you don't believe me, just ask Tom Hanks.

"It is reminding us that we are all connected and something that affects one person has an effect on another. It is reminding us that the false borders that we have put up have little value as this virus does not need a passport. It is reminding us, by oppressing us for a short time, of those in this world whose whole life is spent in oppression.

"It is reminding us of how precious our health is and how we have moved to neglect it through eating nutrient-poor manufactured food and drinking water that is contaminated with chemicals upon chemicals. If we don't look after our health, we will, of course, get sick.

"It is reminding us of the shortness of life and of what is most important for us to do, which is to help each other, especially those who are old or sick. Our purpose (in life) is not to buy toilet roll paper.

"It is reminding us of how materialistic our society has become and how, when in times of difficulty, we remember that it's the essentials that we need (food, water, medicine) as opposed to the luxuries that we sometimes unnecessarily give value to." (attribution unknown)

And then there is the promised land of saving our planet. This pandemic has done more to cool our planet in the last four months than all our treaties and best hopes combined. Stopping the machine of capitalism results in an immediate cooling. It is no accident that it took a pandemic to remind us of the promised land we would like to leave a generation hence. As Leah Schade put it in her piece “When Earth Demands Sabbath: Learning from the Corona virus Pandemic:”

“I’ve noted with bitter irony that the virus is using the same tactics against the human body that humans have used against Earth’s body. The virus attacks the lungs, multiplying and destroying the “respiratory tree” down to the tiniest alveoli that enable the exchange of oxygen into our bloodstream. Similarly, humans have pushed into forests and natural areas, destroying the very trees that create the oxygen we breathe.” (In Patheos 3/20/20)

Could this pandemic be the beginning of our journey to a promised land? Breakdowns lead to breakthroughs. I do know this: the world that will emerge from this painful, this awful, pandemic will be quite different than the one that went racing into us. Our journey is beginning and we have crossed the threshold to a liberation yet to come.

After Jesus died and his disciples all fled, something new began to pass. The Book of Acts tells of Jesus visiting the disciples on the Pentecost, fifty days after his death and charging them with spreading the kingdom of God’s love across the earth. Whatever happened, the followers of Jesus, “the people of the way” as they would be known in the first two centuries, regrouped and began to preach and heal as their teacher had done. This was not the Christianity that we know today. In fact, the idea that Jesus had died for our sins would not come into currency until the end of the first century under the teachings of Paul. Rather, these Christians were less concerned with preparing for the next world and more concerned with getting this one ready for God, for the coming of a promised land. Although thoroughly Jewish, this young movement invited people to go beyond Judaism (despite the strong faith in the Law of God), beyond Pagan understanding (despite the influence of myth and mystery), and live out just two commandments: Love thy God with all your might, and love your neighbor as yourself. This simple declaration would herald the promised land to earth now.

I close with this wonderful prayer from Victoria Safford who speaks of the journey taken without a destination, to a promise only whispered, by a people, like our world, beleaguered and afraid:

“They had no idea where they were going, when they left that night, in the dark, without lights, without shoes, without bread, their children smothered against them so they would make no noise They went into the wilderness. There they wandered forty years so many of them died before getting anywhere, and many were born in the desert and grew to adulthood knowing nothing but the journey—not slavery, not freedom, just the going...

“In the springtime we remember: the promised land is not a destination—it is a way of going. The land beyond the Jordan, that country of freedom and dignity and laughter—you carry it inside you all the while. It is planted in your mind and heart already, before you ever start out, before it even occurs to you that in order to leave that life in Egypt, the intolerable bondage of that life, what you need to do is stand up and walk forward.”
(from Walking Towards Morning, UUA)

My friends, perhaps the promised land is not a destination but a future, a time beyond our lamentation when we realize new promise which awaits us just beyond the farthest horizon we see. Let’s keep journeying friends, with each other, through these trials and tribulations to the promised land that is yet to come. Amen.