

“Truth and Why It Matters”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
First Parish Unitarian Universalist
Cohasset, MA
April 9, 2006

Since I was a little girl, Palm Sunday has always left me a bit uneasy. I wanted to take my palm leaf, raise it high, and wave it with loud Hosannas at the entrance of Jesus into the Holy City of Jerusalem. I wanted to celebrate a grand procession and sing some jubilant Hosanna hymns and go away feeling like what I imagine those early palm-wavers must have felt – hopeful and good.

So what’s the cloud that passes overhead or inside? What’s the twinge that says all is not as it appears? It seems apt after the breaking religious news of these past few days to pay close attention to appearances, with the publication in English of the Gospel of Judas, a document from ca. 300 A.D. in the Gnostic tradition, whose papyrus was discovered in the 1970s in an Egyptian cave. Judas is revealed as an intimate ally of Jesus in bringing to fruition what Jesus held to be a divine plan. The Gnostics were regarded as anathema by the early Christian church and the Gnostic gospels were written a few hundred years after the four that we find in the New Testament. If we delve into the complex truths of early Christianity, these later Gospels bear thoughtful witness to the variety and vitality of early Christian belief and remind us once again that revelation is not sealed.

As for that first Palm Sunday, those early Palm wavers could not possibly have known even the rudiments that come to us from the accounts of the early Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke: how Jesus went into Jerusalem and celebrated the Passover seder with his disciples; how he predicted that one of them would deny him three times and that another would betray him; how he was delivered into the hands of the Roman soldiers at Gethsemane, tried so dubiously by Pontius Pilate, and convicted through a chilling bargain made between Pilate and a punitive public. It’s a saga that grew grim and grimmer until the very dawn of what we now celebrate as Easter morning.

Let’s hone in on that entry to Jerusalem, because I believe it holds layers that resonate for the difficult truths that Christianity and yes, the core Christian dimensions of Unitarian Universalism, are reluctant to digest in our own day.

Jesus and his disciples are drawing near to Jerusalem. It’s the season of Passover, and they want to be there to celebrate the Passover Seder. So he sends off two of his disciples to a nearby village and tells them that they’ll find a colt tied up, a colt on which, according to Mark and Luke, no one has ever ridden. They should untie this colt and bring it to Jesus. But not to worry! If anyone says, “What do you think you’re doing?” just say, “The Lord needs it, and will return it shortly.” In other words, go and boldly borrow this small animal.

Matthew reinforces his account with a reference to the Old Testament prophet, Zechariah:

“This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,
‘Tell the daughter of Zion, Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble and mounted on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of an ass.’”

In fact, Matthew tells us that the disciples were sent to borrow two creatures – a donkey and her offspring, an act of double bravado!

According to all three Gospel accounts, off the disciples go, complying completely with Jesus' demand.

Upon their return, they set Jesus upon this small creature, and the procession begins. In their euphoric anticipation of Jesus' approach, bystanders throw their very garments onto the road, and these were not paved roads. They are dusty and muddy. But their garments didn't seem to be enough. They took branches from the nearby trees, palm leaves, which are stiff so they had to work up a sweat in splitting them off to free them for the purpose at hand. Along with their garments, they spread these palm branches on the road, to pave the way for him who held such hope for them, oppressed as they were by an Empire that simply ground them down. Here, they thought, was the long promised Messiah, their King. In the words of Mark, the oldest Gospel:

“And those who went before and those who followed cried out,
‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest!’”

What does it mean, “Hosanna?” I simply sang it and shouted it as a child, believing that singing and shouting was what it was all about, except for that gnawing feeling that I had, knowing the rest of the story.

“Hosanna” comes from the Hebrew. It is an imperative verb meaning “Save!” Of course, the gathered throngs were greeting and praising the longed for Messiah, who would save them as a people. “Save *us!*” they cried. Jesus of Nazareth was raised onto their altar of high hopes for a here and now salvation from all the suffering they had experienced as downtrodden subjects of Rome. They wanted a king. They wanted Superman. They wanted a Terminator. They wanted a Luke Skywalker. They were desperate and hopeful on that day that we know as Palm Sunday. “Hosanna!” they shouted at the top of their lungs. “Save! Save us!”

Imagine for a moment. Imagine, as did my colleague Sarah York, that you were there that day, not as an adult, but as a ten-year old child. Imagine what you might have seen and felt:

It was the Jerusalem tourist season. People were coming into town from all over for Passover week. . . . My folks owned an inn and all people did was complain about the straw in their mattresses. I went out on the edge of town to advertise for [our] inn, and I saw a bunch of people coming toward me all shouting and gathered around a colt. Then they took off some of their clothes. . . and put them on the colt. I wasn't really surprised. Those country folks always act a little odd when they come to the city. Then they put a man on that little colt. I was worried the poor animal might collapse.

Then people started throwing more clothes and some tree branches in front of the man and they called him a king. ‘Hosanna in the highest!’ they shouted. He looked about as much like a king as my little brother. And high is not what he was on that colt – his feet were almost dragging on the ground. I knew my parents would be furious, but I decided to get into the parade and see why this man was being called the messiah.

According to everything I had learned about the Messiah, this guy did not make it. The messiah was supposed to be like David and Solomon. King David was a great warrior, a brave soldier. This man didn't even have a slingshot, as far as I could tell. And when someone made fun of him and threw a rock at him, he didn't say anything. I thought he

was a real sissy, but then I followed the parade on into town where he went into the temple.

And the narrative continues, but you can imagine what an adventurous ten-year-old might have thought. What's up with this guy? He doesn't look or act like a king to me! What good can he do us?

So the truth of Palm Sunday begins to seep through the high decibel expectations, the grandness of the parade, the all-out pomp of a processional. What's up with this guy?

Once again, the figure of Jesus of Nazareth defied expectation. It was not the first time. Born in a humble stable, how could he possibly come to anything? The son of a carpenter, would he even go to a good school? A subject of the Roman Empire, a young man not on the winning side, how could he possibly amount to much?

Palm Sunday carries in its processional sweep an intense unease. I sensed it as a child, knowing more or less the rest of the story. I sense it more acutely today. All was not as it appeared, except perhaps to a candid ten-year-old reporter, invented through a need to strip some surface paint.

Christian theologian Walter Wink observes that Jesus is simply being consistent in his entrance into Jerusalem. He goes so far as to say that Jesus "enters Jerusalem farcically, on a donkey," that it was the church that read such prophetic meaning into this act on the basis of Matthew's reference to Zechariah. Wink posits that Mark and Luke, the oldest of the Gospels, may reflect Jesus' real intent – to lampoon the Davidic kingship by presenting himself as something completely other than what those long-ago crowds hoped for, something completely other than a warrior king. The evidence of Gospel narrative is that Jesus was so down and out, he didn't own a four-legged transport. His only recourse was to borrow one, and not even a horse, a creature of dignity, but an ass, a donkey, a beast of burden. He receives the cries of expectation from the crowds, but in this humble, practically humiliating, posture – as a grown man, dragging his feet along the dusty road, partially strewn with the garments and palms of the crowd. There he was, entering Jerusalem, but shuffling along on a lowly beast that must soon be returned.

What was the truth of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem? What was the truth in the story of Jesus' birth and ministry and betrayal and crucifixion and mythical or otherwise resurrection? It was a complete reversal of expectation. Here was he who some call the Christ, the anointed one, born in a humble stable, because there was no room in the inn. Even then, he was borrowing. And his early witnesses? Simple shepherds who, like the Samaritan of Jesus' later parable, were popularly regarded as being "dishonest, unclean, and no better than gentile slaves."

We know so little about most of Jesus' life, but we're told that as a boy he helped his father, a simple carpenter in a shanty town near the Sea of Galilee, and that he showed astonishing precocity when as a young lad, he engaged the temple sages in heavy debate, but that's about it. His life looms blank for twenty years, with no clues about who he was or what he was about until the Gospel narratives resume at Jesus' encounter with his cousin, John the Baptist. It is at this point that his ministry unfolds. Some might say it unravels, because always, always, Jesus is preaching and practicing a counterculture message of love and compassionate justice and hope against hope among folks who desired far more, commoners who wanted nothing less than divine intervention. How human it was to stand there on the outskirts of Jerusalem, desperate and demanding. "Save us!"

It was not to be. Jesus held his own truth, and it continues to chafe us. I still want to wave my palms and sing my Hosannas, but the unease returns, because I know that wasn't the easy truth of that day. What is it that I'm praising? What is it that I'm hoping for? Jesus, and all kindred prophets who lived and taught the harrowing message of love, turn our desire for divine intervention to save us from whatever suffering we might know smack on its face. Jesus' truth was not an easy truth.

It's not easy to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, because God never seems to conform to our notions of celestial royalty. It's not easy to love our neighbors as ourselves, because in the vernacular of Jesus, we don't get to pick and choose our neighbor. It's not easy to concede that the poor in spirit will really know the kingdom of Heaven, whether that is here and now or in some far-off future. It's not easy to concede that society's fringe, not society's powerful, will inherit the earth or that those who really do hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied or that mercy really counts for much. It's not easy to find purity of heart in a world that would veritably buy our hearts. It's not easy to concede that peacemakers are blessed, let alone to imagine that they might be called children of God. Yet this is the truth that Jesus spoke, sometimes referred to as the Beatitudes.

Then again, it's not easy to affirm the basic worth and dignity of every single person. It's not easy to play fair and be compassionate. We know it's not easy to accept one another where we are and to encourage each other to grow in spirit and deed in our very parish. How clear-cut and easy it would be to communicate our teachings if we had ready-made answers instead of the sorry challenge of searching and searching some more for truth and meaning. It would be so much easier just to ignore the haunts of our conscience and certainly that wretched responsibility of trying to ensure that everyone has a voice in our congregations and beyond. It's not easy to see peace, liberty, and justice as anything other than pie in the sky. And to imagine that every drop of life is connected? Well, that's really harsh!

It startles me sometimes to realize how counterculture our own shared principles are, how akin to the teachings of Jesus they are. It wears me down sometimes as I realize how difficult they are to take seriously, let alone to live out.

What is the truth of our Palm Sunday? Who is the truth mounted on a borrowed donkey, the truth painfully aware of the farcical nature of a procession that will simply bring him into the city of his doom? What did he know that we don't? What does he still teach that we're so loath to learn?

What is truth and why does it matter? What is the truth of this morning in the deepest recesses of our hearts and souls? What is the truth of this morning in the immediate neighborhood of our public square? What is the truth of this surreal entry into Jerusalem that still pulls and tugs, because somewhere, somehow, the exemplar of Jesus reaches us across the centuries? Somewhere, somehow the pathetic and prophetic man on a donkey breaks through our own desperate Hosannas with the gentle but firm assurance that if we do hear his teachings and dare to live by them, we will know the truth and the truth will make us free. So may it be. Amen.

Sources:

The Bible (Revised Standard Version)

Michael D. Coogan, on "Hosanna," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993, 290.

Laurie Goldstein, "Document Is Genuine, but Is Its Story True?" *The New York Times*, Friday, April 7, 2006, A18.

Gospel Parallels: A Synopsis of the First Three Gospels, with alternative readings from the Manuscripts and Noncanonical Parallels. Text is Revised Standard Version, 1952, Edited by Burton H. Throckmorton, Jr., Thomas Nelson & Sons, New York, 1957.

Elaine Pagels, "The Gospel Truth" (op-ed), *The New York Times*, Saturday, April 8, 2006, A27.

John Noble Wilford and Laurie Goodstein, "In Ancient Document, Judas, Minus the Betrayal," *The New York Times*, Friday, April 7, 2006, A1, A18.

Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992.