

What Am I Going to Do With My Life?
Habakkuk 2:9-14, Luke 19:28-40
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
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Lenten Series #6: What is my purpose in life?
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Sometimes you walk into this building, and you have no idea what's going to happen. Could be a slide show about the church in Korea. Could be the little kids singing. Could be great old hymns. Could be that Gielarowski kid is playing the drums way too loud. You just don't know.

But today, you think, you know what to expect. It's Palm Sunday, after all. We all know what that means – even the people who aren't "super Christians" have heard something about Palm Sunday. We know to come in here looking for the crowds waving the branches in the air. Masses of people flocking to Jesus, shouting "Hosanna!" – "Save us now!"

And then Khadija goes and pulls something like this. Did you hear what she read? Call this "Palm Sunday", do you, when Luke doesn't say anything about Palms, nothing about the crowds, and nary a "Hosanna!" in sight. What's that about?

The first thing that we see is that by and large, this is a story about the disciples – the followers of Jesus. This is a word about, and a word to, those who follow Jesus. So if you're one of the people in the room who considers yourself a Christian, then listen up. This is your story. If you're not sure that you're a Christian, then some of this may sound strange to you. That's ok. You have permission to doze. But stick around, because I think that some of this may prove helpful, or at least interesting to you.

Luke gives us a litany of faithfulness. Look at what the disciples do here. They are the ones who go and get the donkey. They are the ones who bring it to Jesus. It's the disciples who put their own clothes on the donkey, and then they are the ones who put Jesus up on the donkey. And as the procession winds its way into Jerusalem, it's the disciples – not a crowd of strangers – who offer all kinds of praise to Jesus.

I hope that's a word of encouragement to you – especially you who feel like nobody notices what you do around here. Who wants to be in charge of recruiting nursery volunteers for the Christmas Eve Service? Who wants to clean up the mess after the last Lenten Dinner? Who wants Jesus to send them into town to pick up the "rent-a-donkey"? Who wants to put their new sweater on the donkey's back? None of this is particularly glamorous – but it all matters, doesn't it? What I hope you notice at this point is that the events of Palm Sunday as they begin to unfold are unfolding around and because of those who knew Jesus best and who are most eager to serve him in unremarkable ways. This is not the fickle crowd who chants "Hosanna!" today and "Crucify him!" on Friday. These are the ones who love Jesus and stuck by him.

Well, we see that they are praising God. Why? Luke tells us: "They began to praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen..." Another translation puts it "all the deeds of power they had seen". Do you get that? The disciples were so overcome by what they had seen Jesus do that they broke out into spontaneous praise. Great. So what had they seen Jesus do? What got them in the praising mood? If you flip back through Luke, you'll see that in the pages preceding our reading for today, we are told that Jesus had dinner with Zacchaeus, healed a blind man, challenged a rich man to give everything he had to the poor, blessed the children, and healed ten lepers while paying special attention to a Samaritan.

They praised God for what they had seen Jesus do. What did he do? Same stories, reverse order:

- He healed those with a deadly, wasting, isolating disease that cut them off from their society, and in so doing, he singled out the poorest and most despised among them for acting faithfully.
- He blessed the nobodies – the children who were insignificant in just about everybody’s eyes.
- He challenged the wealthy to give freely and to abandon their money and follow him.
- He healed a blind man – and not just any blind man, but a poor blind man. Someone who was a pest – a real pain in the neck to the people around him who were just wishing that he’d shut up and let them have a parade.
- He embraced Zacchaeus – a tax collector who suffered the hatred of the entire community. He called Zacchaeus to participate in the justice of God’s kingdom – he brought the outsider inside and called him to live in responsible relationships with those around him.

Do you see those things? Those are “mighty works” and “deeds of power”. In fact, the Greek word is δυναμειων – dynamite! They see Jesus doing all of this and they just erupt with praise! It’s wonderful! It’s crazy! It’s amazing!

And the Pharisees notice that the disciples are all worked up and confront Jesus: “Ah, for the love of Pete, Jesus, get these people under control. Tell them to shut up!”

Now I don’t think that these religious leaders were concerned about Jesus’ disciples violating the Jerusalem city council parade ordinance; they weren’t concerned about the traffic jams that could ensue. They were upset because Jesus and his followers appeared to be concerned with the wrong things. They were celebrating, but they should have been a little more careful – what if they irritated the Romans? Wouldn’t that be bad for Jesus? Wouldn’t that be bad for all the Jews? We can’t offend the folks with power, you know...

And Jesus replies by saying, “You know, if the people who followed me, who saw what I have done, who know dynamite when they see it – if they were to be quiet, then the stones would cry out.”

“The stones cry out”. That wasn’t a new phrase. The last time that had been used in conversation with a religious leader was a few hundred years previously in the book of Habakkuk. The leaders of God’s people were ruling unjustly. They taxed the poor very heavily. They had crooked laws that brought about preferential treatment for the rich. They oppressed the weakest members of their society. And Habakkuk, God’s prophet, said, “Look, if you build your dynasty, your government, your “house” like this – then eventually the stones – the very people on whom your “house” is built – will cry out against injustice. Jesus reminds the religious leaders of his day that God’s kingdom is about bringing wholeness and redemption to all people – not about trying to appease those who think they have power.

Our questions this Lent have been big questions – questions that have to do with the core of our lives. Who am I? How does everything fit together? Who can I trust? What are the values by which I should live? How can I protect myself? Today, we arrive at the sixth of our seven big questions, the question of purpose: What am I here for? What is the purpose of my life?

And so far in Lent, we have seen that much of our world suffers from what could be called a “poverty of purpose”. So many people don’t know who they are, how they fit, who to trust, how to

live...so many are aimless and purposeless... and if that's the case, then why not lose yourself in a mindless game of acquiring more stuff? Why not amuse yourself by taking chances with mind or body altering substances just to make some attempt at creating meaning somewhere, somehow?

But if God is the center of the universe...if God is the author of our beings...if God is the foundation of our lives, then we discover meaning and purpose. If God is who he says he is, then life really is dynamite, and every part of our lives – our work, our leisure, our friendships, our hobbies – can become a means by which we spread God's rule and shout out about God's presence and love. If we who are followers of Jesus see the powerful things that he has done and want to follow him in those things, we will gladly lend our voices to the shouting throng of disciples on the first Palm Sunday. When we see the things that God is excited about, we become excited by them, too. So it's no wonder to open up the paper and read about a Christian leader who says this:

Check Judaism. Check Islam. Check pretty much anyone...But the one thing we can all agree -- all faiths, all ideologies -- is that God is with the vulnerable and poor.

God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war. God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives, and God is with us if we are with them...It's not a coincidence that in the scriptures, poverty is mentioned more than 2,100 times.¹

That's dynamite! Do you know which Christian leader said that? Was it Jerry Falwell? Billy Graham, James Dobson? I'm sorry to say that it was not. It comes to us from an Irishman who was born with the name of Paul Hewson, but who is now known simply as Bono. He sings in a rock band called U2.

I'm glad that Bono said that – he said it, incidentally, when he was invited to preach at the National Prayer Breakfast on February 2, 2006. But it grieves me to see that when it comes to issues of injustice, too often it is the followers of Jesus who are silent. We've lost our voice. We don't care about the dynamite any more. Jesus said, "If my disciples weren't excited about the liberation of the poor and the inclusion of the outcast, the rocks would cry out." The reality is that the rock stars are crying out. Bono. Angelina Jolie. Sting. Bob Geldorf and the Boomtown Rats. These are the people who are confronting our culture with the call to care for the poor. Listen to Bono again:

It's not about charity, it's about justice. And that's too bad.

Because we're good at charity. Americans, Irish people, are good at charity. We like to give, and we give a lot, even those who can't afford it.

But justice is a higher standard. Africa makes a fool of our idea of justice; it makes a farce of our idea of equality. It mocks our pieties, it doubts our concern, it questions our commitment. Six and a half thousand Africans are still dying every day of preventable, treatable disease, for lack of drugs we can buy at any drug store. This is not about charity, this is about justice and equality.

Because there's no way we can look at what's happening in Africa and, if we're honest, conclude that deep down, we would let it happen anywhere else – if we really accepted that Africans are equal to us...

Look at what happened in South East Asia with the tsunami. 150,000 lives lost to that misnomer of all misnomers, "mother nature." Well, in Africa, 150,000 lives are lost every month. A tsunami every month. And it's a completely avoidable catastrophe.

¹For complete text, see <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/bononationalprayerbreakfast.htm>

It's annoying but justice and equality are mates, aren't they? Justice always wants to hang out with equality. And equality is a real pain in the ass. Seriously.

What is the purpose of my life? For many Christians, it has become "seeking God's blessings." Asking God to be with me wherever I am. Asking God to enlarge my territory or to give me my best life now. A more biblical answer, though, comes from the rock star:

'Do to others as you would have them do to you'. Jesus says that...

Thus sayeth the Lord: 'Bring the homeless poor into the house, when you see the naked, cover him, then your light will break out like the dawn and your recovery will speedily spring forth, then your Lord will be your rear guard.' The Jewish scripture says that...

A number of years ago, I met a wise man who changed my life. In countless ways, large and small, I was always seeking the Lord's blessing. I was saying, "I have a new song, would you look out for it. I have a family, I'm going away on tour, please look after them. I have this crazy idea, could I have a blessing on it..."

And this wise man asked me to stop. He said, "Stop asking God to bless what you're doing. Get involved in what God is doing - because it's already blessed."

Well, let's get involved with what God is doing. God, as I say, is always with the poor. That's what God is doing. And that is what he's calling us to do.

So this week, I want to give you some homework as you try to answer the question, "What am I going to do with my life?" Go home and read Luke 17 – 22. Look at the kinds of things that Jesus was up to in his life. I dare you to be involved in the same kinds of things. Look at how Jesus spent himself searching for the lost, the left out, and the dead. Look for some of those folks yourself, and give yourself to them.

I've got to warn you, though...when you go looking for the lost, the left out and the dead during Holy Week...you might be surprised.

I'll see you at the table for the Lord's Supper on Thursday night. And I hope to see you next Sunday, too. Who knows what could happen? It's Holy Week. Amen.