

Palisades Presbyterian Church

**Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time**

November 19, 2006

Reflection:

*Reflection:*

“People who want to understand democracy should spend less time in the library with Aristotle and more time on the buses and in the subway.”

- Simeon Strunsky

“Along the iron veins that traverse the frame of our country, beat and flow the fiery pulses of its exertion, hotter and faster every hour. All vitality is concentrated through those throbbing arteries into the central cities; the country is passed over like a green sea by narrow bridges, and we are thrown back in continually closer crowds on the city gates.”

-John Ruskin

Readings: Hebrews 10:11 – 14 (15 – 18) 19 - 25

The Gospel According to Mark 13: 1 - 8

Hymns: #8 Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates

#106 Alleluia, Alleluia! Give Thanks

#169 In the Day of Need

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Riding the ①② or ③ Line; It's that Time of Year

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It is known as the *Little Apocalypse*, this section of Mark that has Jesus talking about the destruction of the temple. Written, somewhere, we think, around 90 CE, it would have been penned 20 years, after the fall of the temple in 70 CE. Certainly an apocalypse to the Jews of the time and those who would follow

It is also likely that these words attributed to Jesus are actually a composite of things written with him in mind, and written for a later church, incorporating Jesus' sayings into a sequel, of sorts, a postscript that is fuller than the actual events—a creation a narrative more than a first-hand document.

We've talked about changes in the text before, and always fair and important questions are: “What, if anything did Jesus really say?” “Which of any of the stories were actually true and accurate, as written? Such is the work of exegesis.

Fortunately, the same processes of exegesis, such as text criticism, that are incorporated into delving into a better understanding of the discrepancies are also used to affirm sections of the Scripture. Additionally, there is some historical corroboration, such as in the writings of an historian of the times, Flavius Josephus, whose works are published and generally are simply called: *Antiquities*.

For example, in Book 18:63-64 of a Greek version of *Antiquities* copied in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, Josephus writes:

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, for he was a doer of wonders, He drew many after him. When Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day (*Antiquities* 18:63-64).

Ah, but there are differences even in copies of *Antiquities*. An Arabic version of the same section from a text used in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century states

At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus, and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon their loyalty to him. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive. Accordingly they believed that he was the Messiah, concerning whom the Prophets have recounted wonders.

What was added, what was removed? Why? Why not? Hard, if not impossible, to say.

There are other sources, too, for confirmation of what Jesus might have said, helping us to understand what might have been added – and why.

**Q**, you may have heard of it. The term comes from the German word *quelle* which means Source. It is a believed collection of sayings thought to be one of the two sources for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the other Source being Mark, the earliest of the gospel writers. Here is a pretty good overview on the subject of Q from religious tolerance.org:

There is a widespread belief that the authors of the Gospels of Mark and Luke:

- Were not named "Mark" and "Luke."
- Were not eye witnesses to Jesus' ministry in Palestine?
- Relied on a growing oral tradition of the early Christian movements concerning Jesus' teachings.
- Copied much of their material from a *pre-existing document*.

The German researchers who pioneered in this work called this lost document "*Quelle*" which means "*source*." This is usually abbreviated as "Q."

The Gospel of Q remains a hypothetical document. No intact copy has ever been found. No reference to the document in early Christian writings has survived. Its existence is inferred from an analysis of the text of Matthew and Luke. Much of the content of Matthew and Luke were derived from the Gospel of Mark. But there were also many passages which appear to have come from Q.

Many theologians and religious historians believe that Q's text can be reconstructed by analyzing passages that Matthew and Luke have in common.

**If** the Gospel of Q exists, it might best be regarded as a reconstructed Gospel. Many believe that it was written much earlier than the four canonical gospels in the Christian Scriptures (New Testament): Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. It may have been the first of the 40 or so Gospels that were written and used by the early Christian movements.

The Gospel of Q is different from the canonical gospels in that it does not extensively describe events in the life of Jesus. Rather, it is largely a collection of sayings -- similar to the Gospel of Thomas. Q does not mention events like Jesus' virgin birth, his selection of 12 disciples, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension to heaven, etc. It represents those parts of Jesus' teachings that his followers remembered and recorded about 20 years after his death. *"He is presented as "a charismatic teacher, a healer, a simple man filled with the spirit of God. Jesus is also a sage, the personification of Wisdom, cast in the tradition of King Solomon."*

**If** the Gospel of Q did exist, then it is extremely important to many believers and theologians. It may contain the earliest descriptions of beliefs, behaviors and expectations of one group of Jesus' followers. Many are convinced that the canonical Gospels contain extensive material that is not historical, including non-existent events in Jesus' life, words that he did not say, teachings that he did not make, and actions that he did not take. Having access to a document written decades before the canonical gospels may allow theologians to separate what they regard as fact from fiction in the Christian Scripture's descriptions of the life of Jesus.

To others, the Gospel of Q is a non-issue. As Eta Linnemann comments, it doesn't exist and *"...is nothing but fantasy....Such totally subjective arrangements, depending on dubious suggestions about the historical background, amount to novelistic trifling with early Christian origins."* To those who believe that God inspired the authors of the Bible to write error-free text, it matters not one iota whether some of the Gospel content was derived from an earlier document. The Holy Spirit has guaranteed that the Bible is inerrant.

And so I sat on the train this week, with some of this in mind, this morning's readings ruminating about. Knowing that the language or even the images are only important in that they point to the something much greater, with much more commonality across all religions, denominations, sects, and faith traditions – but what is it that they point to, what brings all of us who are travelers and seekers together?

For many, faith, religion, denominations, sects – have all become as compartmentalized as the cars in a train. Just like in the subways I ride more often at this time of the year, one line goes here taking me to a specific place, ignoring – if you will – any other lines going their separate ways - the 1, 2, 3, E or F or whatever. Yet I can't help wonder, actually, can't help believe they all – eventually get to the same yard, if not in the serpentine steel tracks – then at least in the final journey we all eventually will take. Today, I'm heading to Penn Station Penn Station and Macy's Herald Square for Parade preparation. But there's a greater journey afoot, deeper questions than will Sponge Bob fly?

What's the connection we share? What is the unifying event, belief, or aspect of our being that brings us into the unified greater consciousness that transcends the daily, happy, sad, passing through mentality of a bus or train or plane, amidst masses of people - distracted, disparate, disaggregated, and juxtaposed into a society and larger humanity?

And I wonder, if Jesus were in that train what would he do? Would he charismatically draw everyone in? Would he speak to the gathered travelers like those who traveled and found him on their path in First Century Palestine and stayed to listen and be fed? How many would miss their stop, be late, need food, share what they had, repeat the loaves and fishes of sorts? How many might ask for healing for ailments of our day, yet unchecked by drugs or other cures? How many would simply try to touch his sleeve, knowing...

Who would they be that would scoff and challenge him out of their cynicism, anger, fear? Would he be peppered by questions about right to life, homosexuality, political leaders, abuse in the church, the decline of religious institutions, the irrelevancy, for many, of the church and the alignment of practice and teachings.

Or, would he sit silently – maybe as he once did long ago – asking for help and guidance in how to touch peoples' lives in meaningful ways? Ways that would bring them closer to the God that burned in his heart, the Spirit that filled his lungs and being?

And, would there be any doubt in his mind that the work of modern times was as dangerous and life-threatening as any time before? Would his heart again be heavy with the cross he needed again to bear?

From what we know, Jesus entered into the tension of his times, into the places where peoples' lives and spirits were most marginalized, and he invited them into a new and radical form of being and belief, a way that so challenged the dominant powers of the time that it cost him his life. And not without pain, whether uttered in doubt or in recitation of the Psalm 22,

Matthew 27:46 "Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' "

Based on his life and teachings how are we called into that tension in the faith tradition we follow. How do we be disciples?

And so, on a train into NYC, with my Parade credentials in hand, knowing I would be here today before you –speaking, I wonder about these things and more.

And then I see a kid in the car or at the station. Laughing, smiling, and bundled up ready for the holidays. A kid who might never know the sting of prejudice or marginalization in quite the way his or her predecessors had known. I see the helping organization at work during this time of the year, much as our own who stood in front of Stop and Shop yesterday collecting food and money for those in need. I see the wonder in the eyes of the tourist and the natives at the tree rising in Rockefeller Center, and I see couples – same and different sexes, alike, some bold enough to hold hands or be arm in arm all to see. Some not yet, maybe soon...

And I think, there I something happening. In fact, just look at the way we touch others and you know there's a lot happening from here and out there. I don't have to know all that that entails; I just have to believe that it is. Does that make sense?

It is not given to me to find the unified field theory of humanity in such a way that I can become the head guru in charge with all the power to throw the switch and change things – all things – for the better. After all, what good is the power if you can't do it all?

No, but it is for me to get beyond the words and the controversies and dilemmas – to the same place that Hebrews speaks of in this morning's readings, that place where Jesus entered and by living his life and being willing to sacrifice his life – changed all things since that time.

It is more than just thinking that I just need to live a good and generous life. And it is more than the Jesus I understand – but it is the teachings of Jesus and the practice of those – the leaning into them as best I can that leads me through the portal to the same place, I believe, that other faith traditions lead their faithful – to a God beyond all of our understanding, most likely closer to Jesus than I can ever expect. And in the process – things happen. Don't know how, they do.

So, I live into this realm of action that is limited, language that is limited, and knowing that I am, nonetheless, in a place of abundance – in love, call, and resources. And when I start to forget that or feel like its losing some of its efficacy, I get back into community, service to others, worship, prayer – and I at some point remember about the Teacher we follow.

That's not to say that I am still humbled and frustrated by a world in such great need; it is to say thought that that is when I need to remember the person directly in front of me at that moment, the place upon which my feet stand at that

moment, and to “restart” there and trusting in God – at that moment, to move me in the next right direction.

It is sometimes, really all time ... one foot in front of the other that gets me to where I am going.

As we come into Thanksgiving, my prayer is to try to be thankful one person at a time, whether loved or less than loved. I am going to do my best to see God’s spirit in each and every one and ask to be thankful for their and God’s presence.

That’s my prayer.

From there, I’ll let God take care of the rest...

Somewhere, all those trains get to their destination – and each and every journey can be a modern day Q – a source of God in our lives and others. Somehow, I think, just recognizing that will welcome whatever God has next for us into our lives.

A Prayerful and Blessed Thanksgiving to you all.

Amen