

Palisades Presbyterian Church
April 20, 2008

Very Truly Yours...
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I honestly didn't know where to start today. My mind felt a little like it was a washing machine, filled with different articles of clothing, all swishing about, easily identifiable on their way in – losing their form once the water, detergent, and motion, at best, giving me a soapy view through the portal of glass on the machine's side.

April 20, 1999, nearly 10 years ago, at 11:10 AM Mountain Daylight Time, Eric Harris and Dylan Kliebold arrived at Columbine High School in different cars, setting into motion one of the first of most heinous of tragedies ever to take place in a public school setting. Let us continue to pray for those involved, whose lives were forever changed and continue today to live with the scars of what began on that day.

And, of course, this is the week of Passover, one of the High Holy Days, commemorating the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt after 400 years of slavery, in the spring of somewhere around 1000 BCE. Together with Sukkot ("Tabernacles") and Shavout ("Pentecost"), Passover is one of the three pilgrim festivals during which the Jewish population made their journey to the temple. Shalom on Passover to all who observe and remember those who do.

Perhaps, like me, you found yourself watching the visit of Pope Benedict XVI on his first visit to the United States. I have found myself muted, for the most part about this pilgrimage of the Holy Father of the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, I also found myself hoping that this visit might produce some kind of a breakthrough in the "log jam," as Jack calls it, which seems to prevent religion from getting to the people. I struggle with the pomp and preparation, and found most meaningful the few instances when the Pope seemed unguarded, spontaneously speaking from the heart. The momentary glimpses into his humanity were more reflective to me of Jesus than all the circumstance, which accompanied the visit.

And egotist that I am, I found myself sitting on the couch, having turned off the reports of the evening news thinking about what I would like to say to the Pope; the conversation I would like to have. I wondered if he would come and sit down on the couch in my apartment, no special chair, no handlers, secretaries, body guards, maybe even throw on a pair of jeans and a sports shirt and share with me a cup or two of espresso and have a "very truly yours chat."

I wonder the same thing, in all fairness, about most world leaders. Except with this man, something is very different. There are few who have such power to change things by a word or an action, just as he did when he offered Rudy Giuliani communion at one of the

masses. In so doing, some say he contradicted the bishop who threatened to withhold the Eucharist from John Kerry during his campaign because of his support for Choice. A position that Giuliana also holds. That simple act seemed to say that Benedict refused to politicize the Eucharist, offering the sacrament instituted by Jesus to all who seek him and his Shalom. Victims, perpetrators, captives, the masses, and all their leaders. It was quite a move, I think.

These are such moments that soften me and encourage me, moments of universal attention when the promise and love of Jesus, the embodiment of the Shalom of God, are present giving me hope to a world. They are the moments of the person stepping aside and allowing the Spirit to flow. They are the moments when I see the Spirit and not the Institution – in spite of the Institution – and I see God at work, in spite of the shortcomings of human actions, and the barbed wire we sometimes place around people and their lives, as part of the discrimination and oppression that infects religious institutions to this day.

I still believe, perhaps as you, that the Spirit is undeniably in this world, especially in its power to change the church. Jesus has given us such a promise in today's readings. In the second reading delivered this morning by Richard, John – gives us one of those “very truly yours” moments of Jesus’ when he tells the disciples and his followers – including us, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God and Believe in me.” And as if to brush aside all doubt, he asks them the formative question of faith: “Would I lie to you?”

Now, there is a question! “Would I lie to you?” And as if to deal even with some question about whether they were unsure of his truthfulness, Jesus says, “OK, if that’s not enough, if you can’t believe in that, then believe in the works you have seen.”

It is easy to say, “OK, fine.” Two thousand years ago, in the flesh, people saw what we are still trying to know; they were around and with him; they knew first-hand whether or not he kept his word or promises. What do we have to go on today?”

Well, I think we have a lot to go on today, but I am very aware that, at best, I can only describe my own thoughts and beliefs and encourage you to do the same.

Jesus and the truth for me are not so much couched in the miracles he performed or even in his appearances after his death – in many ways, collectively, we have all experienced this Jesus in our lives.

Jesus and his truth for me is in the verses of Scripture from Luke 9:51-54: “When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him, but the people refused to receive him (because they heard he was on his way to Jerusalem). And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, ‘Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?’” Or as the Message says: “Do you want us to call a bolt of lightning down out of the sky and incinerate them?”

You have to love those disciples. Do you think they were any less fervent and misinformed at that moment and others than when they responded to intransigence with the threat of a sword or heavenly retribution? Sound familiar?

And Jesus rebuked them (frustrated, I am sure, with their misinformation about who he was and what he was doing), and said, “No, we will go another way.”

Jesus had an out. “Oh, well. Flight delayed. Let’s cancel the trip.” No, he continued; navigated beyond all obstacles; until he reached his destination and our hope for humanity.

That, to me, is the truth of Jesus. He knew the path and stayed upon it, regardless of the danger that lay ahead. And more, he tells us:

“If you believe in me, very truly I tell you, you will do the works I have done and more, since I will be in a better place to help you! In my name, ask for anything, I will do it!”

The promise of Jesus. It does not include violence or lightning bolts from heaven; it does not include destruction of “enemies.” It is the promise that if you seek me, I will answer you.

The Greek reads like this:

Kai o ti an aitesete en to onomati mou touto poieso ina doxasthe o pater en to uio
ean ti aitesete me en to onomati mou ego.

And whatever and whatever ask in the name of my that do so glorified the Father in the Son if anything as I in the name of my I do.

Glorify God, not humanity. Jesus’ life was all about glory to God.

In the ancient world, remember, the universe was thought to be structured in three sections: up above the canopy was the water, thus the sky reflected blue and once in a while let some water fall. Here on earth, we were on the crust of time and the world. The terra firma; and below was the underworld, Hades, where the dead went and from where they would originally rise. So, the language of raise up and lower – from Jacob’s ladder to Jesus’ cross, was a language of intersection between humanity and God – of the ancient world.

Immanence, or the presence of God, was preached by Jesus at all times: “The kingdom of God is at hand.” Transcendence, though, naturally, was thought of as God being outside the world, above the canopy, now and then directly intervening in the world. It was a concept or notion that satisfied the physical understanding of the world at the time.

There have been others, though, who see transcendence as something outward other than outward. Instead, it is an inward journey, to a place, as Karl Barth says, where...“God is.” Barth is somewhat controversial in his statements that God does not exist as an entity; but God is. You cannot encounter God as a person in a person-to-person way, but God is in everyone and you can interact with God through others. According to Barth, the experiences of God, the opening of the doors of heaven, the transcendence and appearances of Jesus, and many more are such things as happen inside, not in the physical outside – as we know it. In those moments of great immanence the portal appears to a place deeply inside our being that shines through in amazing ways.

“Let the light shine!”

Very truly yours, Amen Amen, truly truly I say to you...

Can you hear the plea in Jesus’ voice, “Please, you have to believe me – what more do I need to do to convince you to let go and see...?”

Since the days of Jesus, to one degree or another we have all seen. We have all known Jesus as God in our own ways – or God as Jesus, perhaps. There are examples, like Stephen, of this morning’s first reading, the first martyr who emulated Jesus in all the ways he knew. Stephen, who was executed because he enraged the Sanhedrin in his teachings that were perceived as a threat to Temple and their power base. Stephen’s preaching mirrored Jesus’: God does not dwell in one place – the Temple; the Jews of the Passover and before found God in Babylon, Egypt, the Desert, and all places they went knew God outside the Temple. Nor does God dwell in any building made at the hands of humanity:

(Isaiah 66:1-2) “Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool; Where then is a house you could build for me? And where is a place that I may rest?”

Such a challenge to authority led to Stephen’s being stoned to death; incidentally, as Saul stood by guarding the clothing of the witnesses who killed him. One wonders if it was the experience of Stephen’s faith that eventually led to Saul’s conversion.

One wonders if will eventually be the experiences of captivity, the Holocaust, Columbine, lynching, hate crimes and other injustices against creation that will actually convert those who will lead this church into a time and place where it is not politicized or polarized.

“Have **I** lied to you – to **you**?” Jesus asks. Not have others lied to you, not have others misled or hurt you or loved ones, but have I lied to you?

The answer is in the transcendent heart and soul that you know in yourselves and meet in others. It can be no other way, I think. Jesus outside of who we are, as some promise to grasp as we go round and round – that Jesus is too much of this world, of secular,

institutional design; a Jesus of indulgences for sale – like the one of the then Holy See that contributed to the start of the Protestant Reformation in the first place.

It's a much different Jesus. The Jesus of the heart and soul is a revolutionary God that calls to us as it did to Stephen. And there is risk in seeking to unleash such a Jesus, such truth into the world. It may just bring a stoning response of the post-modern world. In fact, in one way or another, it will.

As we go from here today, I leave you with the thought that if Jesus were to write you a letter in which all these things were once again told, at the end of it, I don't think he would sign off with some long complicated blessing following the model of the epistles or ancient writings, but simply and clearly, with:

Very truly yours,
Jesus

This is the Jesus I find here in you. It is the Jesus I seek in myself, and the one I pray we may always find in each other.

Truly, truly may this Jesus be with you always and in all ways.
Amen