

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALM SUNDAY
“THE GATHERING STORM”
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
April 5, 2009
Mark 14:1-15::47
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. Services

In the death of Jesus we see life at its best and at its worst. His enemies were determined to destroy this innocent and loving human being. But he was determined to remain faithful to God regardless of the cost. Here we see the extremities of both evil and good.

Life is not easy for the followers of Jesus. God does not build a wall of protection around us, but promises to strengthen us and redeem us through our suffering. No cross, no crown! We all have our crosses to bear.

When we look carefully at the events that led up to an experience of ours, we get a sense of inevitability about what happened. We wonder why we did not see the signs of what was coming. When we look back from the cross we find in the four Gospels the increasing inevitability of Jesus' death. Can we see where our lives are going?

Winston Churchill was Britain's prime minister during World War II. When he left office, in 1945, he began writing his six-volume *The Second World War*. It is brilliant in its comprehensive account of the war and moving in its intimate detail. The first volume recounts the failure of the peace made after World War I, the rise to power of Hitler, and the Nazis' gradual spread beyond Germany's borders. Churchill saw the coming crisis much earlier than others. **“I felt,”** he wrote, **“as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial.”** This first volume is titled *The Gathering Storm*.

The first thirty years of Jesus' life are largely a mystery. What little information we have indicates that, while Jesus had an ordinary childhood,

he was also a child of extraordinary promise. Though celebrated now for two thousand years, Jesus' birth was largely a private event at the time. Mary and Joseph were simple Galileans with nowhere to stay in Bethlehem. Surely they were sustained by the earlier promises about their child. Every parent is. But, aside from angels and animals, the newborn was welcomed only by shepherds, and, later, Eastern magi. A few days after his birth, we know that the infant was dedicated to God in the temple, and received the blessings of Simeon and Anna. At age twelve Jesus was taken to Passover in Jerusalem, where he amazed the rabbis in the temple with his wisdom, and caused his parents consternation by not being in the homebound caravan. In Nazareth, Jesus worked with his carpenter father, and was not remembered as exceptional by the people of Nazareth when he returned home as an adult. His early years apparently consisted of the happy "**sunshine days**" of ordinary childhood.

From the very beginning there were disturbing signs. Jesus matured physically and in wisdom, and Mary treasured these growing years in her heart. But when the infant Jesus had been brought to the temple, the aged Simeon had said to Mary: "***This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed - - and a sword will pierce your own soul too.***" Mary must have always thought of Jesus' future with a bit of private apprehension and with a silent prayer.

While the first thirty years of Jesus' life are passed over almost in silence, a single week at the end of his life takes up roughly a third of the material in the four Gospels. It is Passion Week or Holy Week.

Jesus and his disciples have come to Jerusalem for Passover. Jesus has made the journey knowing that he is walking into a gathering storm. His disciples are confused about what lies ahead, but they realize their master is troubled. At Passover, devout Jews come from near and far, and the city is crowded and festive. These visitors know nothing of the treachery that is afoot. Their own religious leaders are conspiring to have Jesus killed. Because it is Passover, they want to do it surreptitiously, so as not to arouse the masses of people that fill the city.

Should the people be stirred up to defend Jesus, it would not be the first time patriotic Jews rallied around a revolutionary zealot. The desire to throw off the yoke of Rome is a burning fire in the heart of every citizen.

From the time Jesus first appeared, people have been hoping he is the Messiah. At first, the crowds thronged him, eager to hear his teachings and see his mighty works. Rumors were rampant about who he was and what he might do. More recently, however, Jesus has begun to disappoint some of his followers, indicating that his kingdom is not of this world. At the same time, he has continued to alienate the Jewish religious leaders. Then, Rome limits the powers of all Jewish leaders. But if they manage to keep the peace, they are allowed to keep some authority. A Jewish rabble-rouser of any type is a threat to this arrangement, and Jesus has challenged the whole religious system. Jesus does not take on Rome, but attacks the very citadel of Judaism. He is dangerous, both to the Jewish religious leaders and to the Roman occupying forces. He must be silenced.

We think of the **“powers of darkness”** as the demonic realm of absolute evil. But we all contribute to the darkness of evil. When you and I use our God-given powers for purposes other than God’s will, our lights dim and the darkness deepens. At noon on the day Jesus died darkness covered the whole land for three hours. What power caused this phenomenon? A storm? Satan? Pilate? Herod? Judas?

Erich Fromm claimed that **“the lust for power is not rooted in strength but in weakness.”** Whatever its source, the desire for power is universal. It is essential that we possess certain kinds of power - - for instance, the power of self-restraint! We need power as much to accomplish good as evil. The problem arises when excessive and unnecessary power is sought. Perhaps because we are sinners, once power is ours it is difficult to give up. Abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass said that **“power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, and it never will.”**

The power of the Jewish religious leaders was severely restricted by their Roman overlords. Still, they wanted to keep it enough to kill for it. They manipulated the situation so that Rome officially killed Jesus, but they were guilty, as well. In the sordid history of placing blame for Jesus’ death, no one is innocent. The Jews are no more **“Christ-killers”** than the Romans. Everyone was aided and abetted by everyone else. We only come near the truth of the death of Jesus when we acknowledge that each of us had a hand in crucifying him.

The way of the cross will be different for each follower of Christ, yet it will always be the way of self-giving love. We’ve been on this journey now

for six weeks, since Ash Wednesday. Sometimes this journey will take you to that side of the city where you may not like to visit. It will take you inside of hospitals and factories, and on our battlefields. This journey will lead you into the very centers of poverty and suffering. On this journey to the cross, you will discover that we must stop and meditate and pray for the strength necessary for this journey.

Jesus asks nothing of us that he did not experience himself. In fulfilling his mission, he freely laid aside all his personal powers and divine claims. He asks us to put the needs of others above our selfish interests. In this gathering storm, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church. Come grow your spirit with us.