

*Visions of Tuolumne*  
Sermon by Rev. Hannah Petrie  
April 12, 2009

Sometimes it is the prelude that matters most - the story before the story. We are so accustomed to looking ahead, or being mindful and looking at the present moment, that, sometimes, we forget the story before the story.

What were you like when you got up this morning? How was your last week? Some of you had a pretty bad week, I know, some pretty good. If you come here with the hope that you will go out better than when you came in – what other reason for coming here if not to come out a bit better - how were you when you came in? What was your story before today's story?

The story before the story. There is a great poem - too long to read today – called 'One Train Poem' by Kenneth Koch that starts with the caution to look both ways after a train has passed because the first train might have hidden a second train.

Do you ever wonder what happened before in a story before the story begins? Ever wonder what happened to Ishmael that he is so depressed, suicidal even, before he decides to go to sea? Or wonder what Bob Cratchit did before he signed on with Scrooge. What was Captain Underpants like as a kid? Or the wicked Wedgie woman? Did she play with dolls? Ever wonder what Santiago, the fisherman in *The Old Man and the Sea* did as a young man? Wonder what Hamlet was like as a baby? Was Lear a happy prince before he became King? How about Raskolnikov as a child? Hedda Gabler – was she a tom boy or what? How did Mary and Joseph meet? Did Hannibal Lector play baseball as a kid?

The story before the story...

Our theological theme for this month is resurrection – new life. How do we move on from the darkness to the light? How are we renewed in our hopes and courage? How do we keep faith from failing? It is at the heart of all spiritual life and all religions – this belief that the new is possible, that life can be renewed, that hope is not foolish. How do we find new life over and over and over again?

So this story is probably pretty familiar though it does have its odd parts. Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter, the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, triumphant, the week before his death, the story before the story of Easter.

The story occurs in all of the Gospels, and so scholars think there is probably some historical basis for it. It is in Mark, the oldest gospel, written about 30 to 40 years after the death of Jesus and it's in the last Gospel, John, written about 70 years after his death. The basic story, and the one I heard as a young kid is this: Jesus, knowing that he is to die on the cross, travels to Jerusalem to be with his disciples for a last Passover meal.

Outside of Jerusalem he tells one of his followers to go to a neighboring village, where he will find a donkey [yes, we made all those jokes when I was little] tied up. It was to be a donkey that had never been ridden – this was somehow important to the story. He is to tell the owner that the Lord has need of it. The follower brings the donkey to Jesus, who then rides it into the city. It is a triumphant ride – people put palms [only John mentions palms which are not native to Jerusalem. An article in the NY Times on Friday reported that more churches are ordering Fair Trade palms this year! Progress!] down on the road in front of the donkey – like the red carpet for the Oscars – and they shout hosanna, proclaiming Jesus as Lord.

He goes on to the Temple and throws out the moneychangers. The Last Supper follows, then the betrayal by Judas, the trial by Pilate, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. Mark spends a good bit of time describing the events of that last week – the Passion as it is known, and the Jesus of this last week is strong and judgmental and firm. This is not a passive and sweet Jesus, but a strong and commanding presence.

The curious incident I mentioned is when Jesus curses a fig tree. Entering Jerusalem, Jesus is hungry and he sees a fig tree full in leaf but with no fruit. It was not the season for figs to be on the tree [we have a fig tree at home – it is now fully leafed - and get a few figs in June and the main crop in August – I love figs!], and Jesus curses the fig tree and the tree withers and dies.

Strange, yes? - that cursing of the tree. It had done nothing wrong, and it seemed to be out of spite and anger that Jesus cursed it. It did not fit the picture of the Jesus I was taught – on the other hand it did make him a bit more human.

So what is this about this story?

As you know, I am having surgery this Wednesday, having a new hip put in. I find this an absolute marvel, and in some ways it seems very unreal to me. A number of people have told me it will change my life, and the thought of being able to walk without pain, put on socks normally, is an inviting thought. Still, it is major surgery and I am not without my worries. I am scared and expectant.

I have been thinking about the last time I was out under general anesthesia – and this is where the sermon title comes from. Before the anesthesiologist slipped the tube in the needle in my arm, she told me to think of a pleasant place. The first place that came to my mind was Tuolumne meadows, up above Yosemite Valley in the Sierra Nevadas. If you have been there you know how beautiful it is. She then told me to count down to 100, and I think it was around 94 that I was gone.

Later, when they began to wake me up, I said ‘No, let me go back to where I was.’

It was not Tuolumne, however, but pure emptiness. Now I know that anesthesia is meant to put you out, but the experience was more than being unconscious or being in a deep deep sleep. Physiologically it might have been that, but spiritually, I felt, it was something different.

All I could think of was the Buddhist notion of nirvana – what happens at death, or at enlightenment. It is often described as the blowing out of a candle – a nice image of death I think – and what remains when the candle is blown out? Where is the flame? It was a remarkable experience, one that has stayed with me for some years now.

It was an experience of bliss, as close to enlightenment as I have ever come, as close to entering what some Buddhists call ‘the pure Land.’ I assume that Sufi dancers, the whirling dervishes, experience this as they twirl, that this is what St John of the Cross meant by the dark night of the soul, that Teresa of Avila experienced in contemplative prayer.

I have to say that this makes absolutely no sense to me. I disappeared but was more fully – more fully what? – more whole – than I ever have been. It was a mystery; it is a mystery. It was wonderful.

I imagine this might be what Jesus experienced at the last when he said ‘Into thy hands I commit my spirit.’ Surrender, a total letting go. When the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree and the veil of illusion fell away and all distinctions disappeared – this is what he might have experienced.

As I said, I am not sure this makes sense, but that makes it no less real. One of my favorite books is from the 14<sup>th</sup> century and is titled ‘The Cloud of Unknowing.’ It is a primer on contemplative prayer and suggests that to experience the sacred we move through a cloud and ‘unknow’ as we move. The argument is that the experience of God, of the holy, of the sacred is not intellectual, not a matter of knowing, but of shedding. It is not ignorance but of letting go of ideas and preconceptions. The anonymous author says that we cannot know God through knowledge, but only through love.

So what does this have to do with resurrection? This is not about whether Jesus rose from the dead or not – Unitarian Universalists have always claimed that he did not. But we certainly do believe that our lives can be, and must be, constantly renewed.

So let me go back to the story before the story, because if we are to find a sense of renewal in our lives, we need to think about what we do for that to happen – the story before the story.

What does Jesus do – he gets mad first. Curses a fig tree and throws the moneychangers out of the temple. New life first of all involves getting rid of things – sweeping clean. You know this don't you? Ask yourself – what do you need to get rid of in your life? Part of the story before the story of Easter is Lent – the time in Christianity of letting go, of giving up. Spring cleaning.

The Buddha said that all suffering comes from attachment. The extreme edge of attachment is addiction. Letting go, sweeping clean. This is the first step. And to realize that sometimes we aim at the wrong target – this sweeping clean is not always wholly accurate – we hit the fig tree instead of the moneychangers. God forgive me for my imperfections!

Yet another part of this is to see this as triumphant – the ride into Jerusalem suggests that we can take charge of our lives, that our lives are up to us, that if we are to find renewal, we will have to take charge.

So, before something new can come, something has to be swept away – arrogance, control, some attachment, whatever. The religious message in this is that what we must let go of, ultimately, is ego and control. This may be a bit violent – throwing the moneychangers out, cursing the fig tree! Out out damn spot!

Well - the story proceeds and Jesus has dinner with his disciples. Here is the next step in renewal: we need each other; we need to sit down with each other and feed each other, share support and sustenance. That is why we are here every Sunday and why we all pledge to the church – it is to preserve the common table from which we all can feed.

Even when it is not perfect – after all, Jesus is betrayed - still we need to be with others. Look around your life – is it filled just with perfect people? Probably not. There are Judas' in all of our lives; there are the internal and external Judas' in all our lives. That is just the way it is. So be it.

Now comes the hard part. As much as we need each other, we are also alone. No one can live our lives for us. I have been hitting this point a lot this spring, and I think it matters – the balance between being an individual and a part of something greater than the self. This is the great tension in the religious life – we are alone but connected; we are connected but alone.

On the night in which he was betrayed – these are beginning words of institution – when the Eucharist is celebrated – communion – a minister or priest will say 'on the night in which he was betrayed ...'

Jesus was alone – and on that night, he went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. I find this part of the story the most poignant, and a reason why I could almost believe. Jesus knows he is going to die, and in a excruciating manner, and he goes to pray. He asks his closest friends to stay awake and watch for him; he asks for some comfort. He prays to his God for help, to be released from this terrible destiny.

And what happens: he hears nothing from his God – only a profound and deep silence. How alone he must have felt! His own Father, silent in his most desperate hour. And his friends asleep – unwilling or unable to stay awake one hour. How alone he must have felt!

I sometimes think it is tragic that the deep humanity of Jesus is so often overlooked. His agony and loneliness at this time. The betrayal by his closest friends, the silence of God, the unnecessary cursing of an innocent tree – these are all things I can understand for they are common and universal experiences. The need to sweep the deck clean, the sense of triumph – all these are so human.

But there is one more thing before the story that is before the story. Remember my anesthesia – I am convinced that the image of Tuolumne meadows was an important part of my experience of spiritual ecstasy. The poem I used for the chalice lighting – imagining the view of gentle hills, roads and sheep from the cross – Jesus entering Jerusalem with a vision of what would occur. It is not enough just to

clean house, to let go – we need a vision of what comes next – of seeing the hills with sheep, of Tuolumne meadows, of walking without pain.

So this Wednesday I will put my arm out and let consciousness slip away. I will let go; I will be emptied out to be reborn in a new way. Maybe I will enter the Pure Land again, maybe not. It is not something I can control, only sometime I can wait for, and let happen.

Yet I want all of you to remember that this is all just a metaphor, a set of stories, pointing to what is necessary for all of us. We all, if we are to grow spiritually, have to be emptied out, in some degree, to some extent, every now and then. To become a vessel waiting for new life and a new spirit.

Padgett is right that it isn't that hard to climb up on a cross – if our mind were strong enough. Pain we can handle – we all do. But to just let go and look – that is much harder. But in that letting go, in being emptied, is the place of resurrection and new life.

Amen