

April 1, 2007  
Isaiah 50:4-9a, Luke 19:28-40  
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“Echoes of Bethlehem”

The sense of the familiar... We go to a new place we have never been and we are struck with a sense that we have been there before. It may be something a waiter says, the way the landscape looks, how a room is arranged or the sound of a voice. Where have I heard those words before? When have I seen this happen before? Suddenly we remember another time, a special place or a face we haven't seen in years.

It happens to me about this time every year, when the sun begins to warm the earth, the pear trees bloom, the grass becomes a carpet of green, the jonquils poke their heads out of the ground and the light has a special quality. It happens when noises of the day begin to subside, the evening light is filtered through the trees and the air is stilled. Looking up and down the street, I sense the secret energy of another spring bursting forth upon the earth, but expressed for a moment in quiet stillness and unruly color. Then I remember another spring evening when I came home for break from my freshman year in college. After a year of new places, people and experiences, I was ready to be home. Before I entered the house, I paused for a moment to look down the street. I will never forget the profound sense of peace I felt as I fell under the spell of the intense beauty of a Columbia spring. Heart, mind and soul revived... Yes, it was good to be home, if only for a few days before taking off again.

Today when these memories storm my heart, I realize that what I experience is not the same as that spring so long ago. Today there are different voices, new places, fresh responsibilities and other dreams. Yet, there is that same irrepressible sense of peace. The sense of the familiar does not repeat the past. It echoes the past. The sense of the familiar ties our life experiences together, helps us see often invisible patterns and anchors our lives in some deeper and continuing purpose of God.

The way Luke remembers the day Jesus entered Jerusalem touches us with a sense of the familiar. In Luke's Gospel, Palm Sunday is a new experience for Jesus and for the disciples. Yet, there is something familiar about it. The gospel writers tell the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in similar ways, but not in the exact same way. Behind each story is the prophecy of Zechariah that the king of David's line will come as a king of peace who enters the city riding on a donkey. When Jesus enters the city, all of the gospels agree that Jesus publicly proclaims his identity as the messiah. What has been hidden is now revealed. In each account there are joyful words of praise and thanksgiving.

Alone among the gospel writers, Luke identifies the crowd of people who welcome Jesus as his disciples. In Luke, these are not the people who will become an angry mob. These are the ones who praise God in loud voices for “all the deeds of power which they had seen.” In fact, Luke is so focused upon the praise of God that he does not even mention the palm branches! Luke, alone among the gospel writers, remembers the disciples saying these words of praise, “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven.”

There is a familiar ring to the way Luke tells the story. They praise God “for all the deeds of power that they had seen,” and the disciples use those two words, “peace and glory,” that we have heard somewhere before. Our minds go back to another journey which took place at the beginning of Luke's gospel, the journey to

Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem to fulfill the plan of Caesar; Jesus went to Jerusalem to fulfill the plan of God. It was God's words of promise spoken by the angels that led shepherds to recognize the work of God in the birth of a child; it was God's words spoken through the prophet Zechariah that enabled the disciples to see that this same child is the messiah and king. In Bethlehem, faithful shepherds praise God "for all they had heard and seen;" in Jerusalem, faithful disciples praise God "for all the great things they had seen." In Bethlehem, the angels give glory to God in heaven and proclaim peace on earth; in Jerusalem, the disciples shout, "Glory to God and peace in heaven." It is familiar; and yet, it is different.

This sense of the familiar tells me that Bethlehem and Jerusalem are connected. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, David's hometown, guides the course of Jesus' life until he comes to Jerusalem, David's capital city. Jerusalem has its beginning in Bethlehem; Bethlehem finds its fulfillment in Jerusalem. The familiar character of the Palm Sunday story reminds me that life is a seamless whole that stands under the plan and providence of God. Jesus freely chooses to accept his God-given destiny to be the savior of the world. Even though it appears that Caesar is directing the lives of countless people, God is there at the beginning, working a holy purpose through the plans of Caesar. Even though it appears that fearful Herod, cautious Pilate, scheming religious leaders defeat Jesus on the cross, God is there at the end bringing victory out of defeat.

Sometimes our lives seem without purpose. Sometimes it feels like we are drifting, going nowhere upon a vast sea. Life can feel like a jigsaw puzzle with too many pieces that don't fit. Sometimes it seems there is no vital connection among all our experiences and all the times of our lives. As Macbeth lamented, "It [Life] is a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/ Signifying nothing." Jesus had every reason to lament his fate and give up his dreams. All the powerful people in his world were against him; his hand-picked disciples didn't understand his message; he knew what kind of agony lay before him. Yet, he kept his face turned to Jerusalem. He entered the city to fulfill the plan of God. Surely that knowledge, that certain conviction of faith, that God's hand was upon his life from its beginning to its end, kept him faithful to the end. It was the echo of Bethlehem that sounded throughout his life and kept him to the end.

A young student at Union Seminary became ill quite during his second year of school. It was discovered that he had a brain tumor. He had to withdraw from school and undergo surgery and intense therapy. While he was recovering, one of the professors wrote to him. The professor wrote: During terrible times, when we are battling for life, it can seem like this moment stands apart from all other moments of life and this time is isolated from all other times. It is like being in a fox hole with the enemy attacking from all sides. It feels like nothing has prepared us for this moment and nothing we have ever known will save us from this terrible situation. You are in the fox hole. Remember that the God who was with you on the day of your baptism is the same God who is with you now. Everything you have ever known about God and everything you have ever experienced of God has prepared you for this moment. These experiences of God will help you see where God is with you now. From God's point of view, our lives are a seamless whole. From our point of view, it seems we catch glimpses of God only now and then.

Like Jesus, our journey begins on earth in the Bethlehems of our birth. Like Jesus, our journey ends in the New Jerusalem in heaven. We live our lives under the blessing of God. When you were born the angels cried, "Glory to God in heaven and peace on earth." And when your final day comes, the divine echo will sound from the earth, "Peace in heaven and glory in highest heaven." Our journey goes from earth to heaven.

Amid the uncertainties and decay of the Roman Empire, St. Augustine proclaimed that our true home is the city of God. Augustine wrote his classic work, "The City of God," in the aftershock of the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410. In his book he answered the question, "If Rome, the eternal city, can fall, what hope do we have?" Our hope is in the city, eternal in the heavens, not made with human hands. In the late 17th century, John Bunyan wrote the devotional classic, "The Pilgrim's Progress from this World to That Which Is to Come," which generations have known simply as "Pilgrim's Progress." We forget that Bunyan wrote this allegorical novel about the struggles and temptations that plague a life of faith while he was in prison for violating the Conventicle Act, which prohibited worship outside the established church.

Like Jesus, Augustine and Bunyan, our final destination is God. This certain knowledge keeps us faithful in the challenges and adversities of this life. As we face our struggles, work for justice, practice mercy and live out our dreams, we look for the places in our lives where the patterns of God's work are evident. We listen for echoes of God's blessing. Perhaps it is in the experience of holding a child in our arms that we remember we are held in the arms of God. Maybe it comes in a moment when we are gathered around the dinner table that we remember that we are nurtured at the table of our Lord. Could it be, when we find the grace to forgive someone who has hurt us deeply, that we remember we are forgiven? Maybe it is when I am asked to give myself in service to others that I remember Jesus, who washed the disciples' feet. It is the pattern of these sounds and glimpses of God throughout our lives that keeps us on the way through Jerusalem to the heavenly city beyond. It is so easy to turn aside, to give up and to throw in the towel. God is here, speaking to us in countless ways, if we but listen to the echo of God's voice and see the pattern of God's ways traced in our lives.

Every spring, I find echoes of that spring so long ago when I felt God's peace. At times, I have listened to other voices than the echoes of God's voice. Through the years, there has been the temptation to give up, to lose myself in bitterness or self-indulgence or to let circumstances beyond my control destroy my life. That sense of peace in God, that carried me so long ago, carries me still. The echoes of holy peace have kept me safe through the years and keep me still. I continue to find God's peace in moments when what is new seems surprisingly familiar and what is novel seems amazingly the same.

In every life on the road to Jerusalem, there are echoes of Bethlehem.

Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.

Peace in heaven and glory in highest heaven!