

Courage for the Path of Holy Week

A Sermon by **Rev. Laurie McKnight-Walker**

Biblical References: Matthew 27 Passion Story

Date: Palm Sunday – March 16, 2008

During the season of Lent, several of our United Church friends have been walking what feels like the road to Jerusalem as they have joined with members of the Algonquin community in resisting what seems like the irreversible will to excavate the soil of North Frontenac county for uranium. As the court proceedings have moved forward, we have learned that big business comes at a very high cost, especially to individuals who try to question or slow down the process of extricating uranium from our earth before there are irreversible consequences.

Bob Lovelace is the first man to pay the high cost of jail time and a huge fine, making no mistake that an Aboriginal man is the first to be prosecuted. Our own non-native United Church members who have joined the protest as a matter of conscience and faith, one man being a member of the Christian Peacemakers organization, will be going to court this coming week, Holy Week. We are invited to attend the court in this coming week to show our support, as I understand many folk are coming from across the province.

The path of Holy Week is unfortunately a path that has been trod many times throughout history. Yet for those of us who claim the story of Jesus' walk to Jerusalem which culminated in his death, we can derive tremendous strength and encouragement from knowing that the Holy One, God's own Son, walked that road of apparent defeat, but in the end, truth and hope prevailed.

We all may know that Holy Week story in our own unique way:

when we face a long road to recovery from cancer treatments or other health issue that saps our strength and challenges our courage and patience
when we face an unfair or unjust system in which we feel powerless
family problems that seem to never end or find the restorative path of forgiveness
walking the long slow path of bereavement when the future looks lonely and bleak
the weariness that church conflicts bring making us wonder at times where God's grace can be found if the church itself cannot be a vessel of God's restoring love
my own personal fears that our discernment process which is a holy opportunity for engaging in very deep listening for God's call in our life as a community of faith will end up resulting in a fractured community that causes people to run away in fear.

As Christians though we have reason to hope. We have a powerful source of strength and encouragement in following Jesus who has walked the road to the cross, the place of pain and suffering, the place where undeserved death intersects with life. The holy week journey, what is known as the Passion of Christ, embodies almost all there is to know and experience of the tragedy and sinfulness found in living a human life:: betrayal by someone you trusted, disappointment and abandonment from those you expected to love and support you, criticism by your colleagues, corruption and incompetence amongst political and religious leaders, public humiliation and shaming, scapegoating, personal doubt, state sanctioned torture and public crucifixion - how much worse can it get except when these are raised to the collective level!

Even the whole earth shook and the sky turned black when Jesus life was taken. His story surely embodies all that might cause despair and hopelessness in our own lives and about the world

and if it does not cause someone to shudder then we are truly lost to cynicism and indifference. And if one believes that Jesus was the Son of God, then it magnifies the tragedy to a truly universal and cosmic level.

Yet, what is also clearly revealed, for anyone to hear and to see, to learn from, to be inspired by, is how Jesus drew from a deeper well of love as he set his face toward Jerusalem, despite his own fear or apprehension. As the tragic and inevitable events unfolded during that week, we are privy to Jesus' own spiritual journey, how he strengthened his faith in times of doubt and fear through honest prayer and wrestling with God, how he had drawn wisdom from his knowledge of his Jewish scriptures, how he gathered his friends and followers around him for some deep sharing the night before he died. We remember how he had built up the muscle of his trust in God's promises to prevail even when faced with powers of evil and death and how many people he had touched with these very mighty powers of God in his ministry. Now Jesus would face the foe directly and would do so with dignity, integrity and purpose as the days unfolded.

This is Jesus' story, but as the Christ, it is our story as well and this should give us tremendous courage to face the foes and the crosses in our own life journey. We know how his story ends on Easter morning as resurrection brings with it the dawning awareness of the truth that when we claim God's love, even death cannot defeat our spirits. Nor can we prevent God from creating a new world order. We are still on this side of Easter, facing the cross of Good Friday which is often the vantage point in which we dwell and which drags us down into hopelessness. But ours is not a story of hopelessness but of hope, not of despair but of trust.

When Rev. David Spivey, the retired United church minister agreed two years ago to serve two sleepy little churches of Plevna and Ompha north of highway 7, he had no idea that a year later due to some Uranium prospectors on some parishioner's land, that his faith and his view of our Canadian government and laws would be so deeply rocked. He did not know that he would be personally embroiled in struggling with the power of Empire in his own backyard. But it has led him back to discover now in a deeper way the resources of our shared Christian faith. I close with words from a recent sermon which has been shared widely for it reminds each one of us that we must trust the promises of God.

"My personal journey through Lent is going to force me back onto that track of trust and faith in the God who calls us and promises us his presence on the uncertain trek through life. We don't know for sure where we are called to go - just that we are called to leave a lot of things behind us and discover God's direction for our future. We don't even know what will happen - to us, or for us - along the way, except that God's grace is always there, God's Spirit is always part of our journey and we are called to dare small and great things as partners with God in Creation."

Prayers Of The People

Compassionate God, we lift our palms of praise with those who first sang out "Hosanna to the son of David!"

Like them, each hand that holds a palm has a heart that holds a story
a story of pain, of disappointment, of sorrow.

We share those stories with you now.

Silent prayer: We pray to you, O God.

Response: Save us, o God.

Prince of peace, You came in humble obedience and walked the path of enduring love even in the face of violent rejection.

We confess that it is difficult to follow your path of peace
and the violent road of abuse and war is all too familiar to us.

We long for your peace O God.

Silent prayer: We pray to you, O God.

Response: Save us, o God.

Saving God, We trust in your goodness and believe your desire is for all of creation to be held in your redeeming love.

Send us out in your name to bring comfort to those who mourn....

healing love to those who are sick.....

and justice to those who are oppressed....

We wait now for your Spirit.

Silent prayer: We pray to you, O God.

Response: Save us, o God.

Amen.