

If They Do These Things When the Wood is Green...

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Luke 23:26-32

Introduction to Scripture:

I am going to read a selection from the gospel of Luke that takes place on the day of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus speaks the words I will read here five days after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem in what we know as Palm Sunday. Jesus has just been sentenced to death by the Romans who were occupying Palestine. He is forced to carry his cross to the mountain called Golgotha outside the city of Jerusalem, because Judaism not only had no death penalty per se, but also would not permit a crucifixion inside its walls.

This passage exists only in the gospel of Luke. It is seldom read and not included in any of the Maundy Thursday or Good Friday readings of what are often known as the "Seven Last Words of Christ."

These are hard words, and as is often the case, an artist or poet may do better at putting flesh on the bones of scripture than scholars, theologians, or even preachers. Therefore immediately following the scripture, Ned Stewart, Andy Bachmann, and Angie Stewart are going to sing a song by Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary, inspired by these words of scripture. The song is hauntingly beautiful, and I ask you not to applaud but let its meditative mood flow into the sermon. The words to the song are printed on your insert.

Luke 23:26-32. As they led Jesus away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross upon him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

GREENWOOD

Peter Yarrow- ©1973 *Pepamar Music ASCAP*

I've seen a thousand people kneel in silence
And I've seen them face the rifles with their songs
I always thought that we could end the killing
But now I live in fear that I was wrong

The killer and the cynic waltz together
Their eyes are turned into their skulls
They do not feel the bullets in the bodies
They do not hear the dolphins or the gulls

If we do these things in the greenwood,
what will happen in the dry?

If we don't stop there'll come a time when women
With barren wombs will bitterly rejoice
With breasts that dry and never fill with promise
Gladly they'll not suckle one more life

Is this then the whimper and the ending?
The impotence of people raised on fear,
A fear that blinds the sense of common oneness
Common love and life or death are here

If we do these things in the greenwood,
what will happen in the dry?

Will no one light the candle in the darkness
Will no one be my guide, not let me fall
I've lost the sense that tells me where the path is
I feel the chill of winter in my soul

There's no way I can say the words more plainly
There's no one left to point at anymore
It's you and me and we must make the choice now
And not destroy the life we're living for

If we do these things in the greenwood,
what will happen in the dry?
If we do these things in the greenwood,
what will happen in the dry?

“There’s no way I can say the words more plainly. There’s no one left to point to anymore. It’s you and me and we must make the choice now and not destroy the life we’re living for” writes Peter Yarrow in the song “Greenwood”.

Before we look at the choices facing us today, let me take you back for a moment to Jerusalem at the time when the gospel of Luke was written. Biblical scholars commonly recognize that all of the gospels were written some time after 70 CE, the fateful year when Rome sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple.

After the time of Jesus death, Jewish zealots grew increasingly frustrated with the conditions of near slavery forced upon the Jews by Rome. These zealots could be called revolutionaries, freedom fighters, guerillas, or if you were a Roman, you would call them terrorists. The zealots began ambushing, trapping, and killing the occupying Roman soldiers.

Rome became increasingly angry at these forays against their troops, so they increased the size of their occupation army and laid siege to Jerusalem during Passover in the spring of 70 CE. They allowed the Jews who making their annual Passover pilgrimage to enter the city and then sealed the city so they could not leave.

As the Romans prepared to attack Jerusalem, virtual civil war was brewing inside the city walls between the zealots who wanted to wage all out war against the Roman army and the more moderate Jewish leadership who believed such a war would have no chance of success. In their own frustration, the Zealots began killing the moderate Jewish leaders, considering them traitors and collaborators with Rome.

While this was going on, Romans attacked and blockaded all food from entering the Jerusalem. Citizens who fled the city to forage for food were captured and crucified. History records as many as 500 citizens were executed each day. One report states that 115,000 people died from battle wounds, capture, or hunger during this portion of the siege.

After about six months of siege, in August the Romans made their way to the center of Jerusalem, tore down the temple walls, and set the temple on fire. Six thousand women and children were taken prisoner. During four years of war, Rome took 97,000 prisoners, many of whom were forced to build the famous Roman Coliseum.

By the time that Jerusalem was destroyed and the state of Israel wiped off the map, Jewish deaths or enslavements were estimated to be as high as one million.

The gospel writers, telling the story of Jesus who was crucified somewhere around the year 30 CE all knew this tragic tale of the decades following Jesus' death. They knew of the civil war between the zealots and the moderates. They knew that the temple had been destroyed. So they often put this foreknowledge into Jesus' own prophecies.

In the passage we read this morning, as the women and the crowd weep for Jesus, he tells them "Don't weep for me, but weep for yourselves, for a terrible day is coming when you will wish that the mountains would cover you."

I think one of the reasons this passage is seldom read is the very difficult and seemingly insensitive words of Jesus who says that in that day women who have no children will be thankful. This is a total reversal of every value in Judaism. Luke is reflecting on the pain and hopelessness that the people of Jerusalem suffered in watching their children die in that war.

In Luke's gospel Jesus essentially says, "If I am crucified for simply preaching a message of love and care when the wood is green, when times are basically good, what will they do when times are hard?"

We are living on the cusp of two crises in America today. The first is the continuation of two wars - Iraq which has lasted longer than any war in American history, and now Afghanistan as well.

On Friday, when I dropped off Sandy at the Gainesville airport there was a family clearly waiting for a soldier to return. There were about fifteen of them. They had yellow ribbons and red, white and blue balloons. When he got off the plane he scooped up his little boy and hugged his wife as everyone cheered. It was poignant. And I thought of how tragic it would have been if he had not come home.

The second is the financial crisis which swept America in 2008, when the stock market lost 50% of its value, and the continuation of that crisis with employment hovering at 11% and the housing and foreclosure crisis still looming.

Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners just wrote a new book, Rediscovering Values on Wall Street, Main Street, and Your Street. He was invited to be part of the world economic summit in Davos, Switzerland last year. He says he was their token spiritual/moral resource. He felt that everyone at that summit was asking the wrong question. "*How long do you think this crisis will go on?*"

Wallis says we should all instead be asking ourselves, "*How will this crisis change us?*" When you start with the wrong question, no matter how good an answer you get, it won't matter very much. If our goal, he says, "is to get back to business as usual, we will soon be right back to what got into so much trouble, because what was *usual* is exactly what got us here in the first place." (p. 5)

This is the question all of us need to ask, how will today's crisis change us?

When Sojourners was founded by a bunch of seminarians hopped up on social justice, Wallis and his friends decided to make a radical point by taking a bible and cutting out all references to the call to do justice and help the poor. He discovered that second most prominent theme in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) was the call to do justice and help the poor. Care for the poor and the call to justice are mentioned in one out of every ten verses in verses in Matthew and Mark, and one out of every seven in Luke.

So Wallis loved to stand and preach, waving this bible full of holes at shell shocked congregations saying, "This is the American Bible, full of holes from all we have ignored and paid no attention to."

I had thought that by this time in history we in this country would have figured out that acting like the Roman Empire trying to dominate distant countries through war was not only morally wrong, but counterproductive.

I had thought that by this time in my life we would have figured out that redistributing wealth was a positive response to the call of Jesus not the encouragement of class warfare. After all, class warfare has been going on in this country for years, and the upper class has won each battle.

In 1969, the CEO of General Motors, America's largest corporation, made eighty one times the annual salary of the average GM worker. The CEO of Wal-Mart, today's largest corporation now makes 900 times the pay of the average Wal-Mart worker. Today, the nation's wealthiest one percent controls over one third of the nation's wealth, more than the entire bottom 90 percent combined.

We're worried about redistributing wealth and hurting the rich? Under Republican president Dwight Eisenhower in 1958, the top tax bracket was 91%. Democratic President John F. Kennedy lowered it to 70%. Today it is only 35%.

We did these things in times of ease and prosperity. If we did these things in the green times, what will we do when the earth's resources go dry?

This is where this scripture passage speaks to me today. Crisis can bring out the worst in humanity. We see this in natural disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes. There is private looting. There is public looting as businesses jack up the prices of everything from milk to plywood. There is political corruption in the hoarding and selfish exploitation of aid by civic officials.

Luke has surely seen this phenomenon in the destruction of Jerusalem. He has seen the civil war that pitted Jew against Jew inside Jerusalem. He has seen Roman soldiers who have lived side by side with the people of the occupied territories for years become rabid killers, personally crucifying Jews by the thousands. So Luke puts these words of fear in Jesus mouth, "If they do these things when the wood is green..."

And yet, we know that nobility in the human heart, like the sun, also rises. In terrible times, stories of selfless heroism emerge in tales of people pulling survivors from the rubble. Money flows in from people who care. Volunteers gather to rebuild broken lives and broken homes. Everyone who has ever worked on a mission trip or on a crisis team has marveled at this.

The story Luke tells in the rest of the gospel is of Jesus who cared for the poor. The Jesus of Luke was a social justice crusader. Luke is the only gospel writer that includes the parable of the Good Samaritan. In Luke's writing of the beatitudes, Jesus says simply and probably accurately, "Blessed are the poor..." not the watered down version in Matthew, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." No, simple and succinctly Luke's Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor."

Resurrection most often occurs in the dry land. In his book, The Evolution of God, Robert Wright points out that Israel was its most

intolerant and self-centered when it was most prosperous and most powerful. Its greatest prophets, Isaiah, Micah, Amos and Jeremiah emerged after Israel was conquered in 800 BCE and many of its people taken into exile. Israel learned from its own exile to welcome the stranger into its midst. It is in exile that Isaiah writes of a heavenly vision of a peaceable kingdom where the lion lies down with the lamb and there shall be no hurting or destroying in God's holy mountain.

The question for us is whether our current crisis will cause us to look deeper at the foundations of our faith and the call to act, not just personally but together, publically, communally, to address the selfishness and greed that brought us here.

I like the subtle way Peter Yarrow changed the words of Jesus from, "If they do these things in the greenwood..." to "If **we** do these things in the greenwood... It's you and me and we must make the choice now, and not destroy this life we're living for."

This is the time to ask, not how long will our crisis last, but how will it change us?

It is in asking this question and living it that I find hope. So I invite all of us to add the question of how today's crisis will change us to our Lenten intentions. How will we change what we buy? How will we change the way we love others near and dear to us? How will we change the way we see the poor and serve the homeless? How will we change the way we work for justice? How will we change the way we live our faith?

These are the questions that take me from the greenwood into the dry land with the hope of true resurrection.

As an affirmation of this, let us read together the words of today's Call to Worship.

Some days there aren't any trumpets, just lots of dragons.

Courage doesn't always roar.

Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of that day that says,

I will try again tomorrow.

(From *Lenten Reflections*, an anonymous quote submitted by Lane Deveraux, Sandy Reimer, ed.)

Prayer:

I open my heart to you God, with all my Lenten intentions held in my hands, wondering exactly where this journey will take me.

I pray that I may let go of the old ways that take me into the places in my life that no longer serve me or those around me well.

I pray that I may be part of a new world, a new community that lives my faith in a way that does justice in the world.

And I pray that new questions may bring healing to my wounds and to our wounded world, in the green wood and the dry.