

Storm and Sunshine¹
TUMC Sermon April 9, 2017 Palm Sunday
Matt. 21:1-17, Isaiah 50: 4-9a

June 20th 2016, the summer solstice last year, I was on a silent retreat at the Sisters of St. Joseph in Pembroke on the shore of the Ottawa River consulting daily with Spiritual Director Sr. Kathleen.

On that day the pre-dinner sky was calm yet darkening and just as I went into the window walled cafeteria that overlooked the lawn down to the river, the storm broke. It was more like a snowstorm than a thunderstorm because of the amount and size of hail and the sideways wind. Common to violent storms, it didn't last long, but at it's worst we couldn't see the lawn let alone the river. Trees were stripped of leaves and branches and if they hadn't been able to bend almost completely sideways in some cases, more would have broken. We did lose electricity and so without indoor light I decided to spend the evening taking a long walk along the river. As the evening sun shone beneath the dark clouds a rainbow appeared, as one might expect. It was one of those full arch double ones. In it's beauty it was as spectacular as the storm had been destructive. An hour later another storm struck, not quite as spectacular as the first, however even though I sought shelter under a park pavilion it was hard to avoid the sideways rain. In the same park there was a pointed canoe, a replica

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of the boats that early loggers had used and I crawled under its hull on the lee side and there for twenty minutes stayed mostly dry while that storm passed. When I emerged another rainbow appeared. The third storm found me more exposed but almost back at my dorm room. This time I got thoroughly wet, but I didn't go inside until I saw my third rainbow of the night.

Later, curled up, warm and dry, I read the following passage from a book that I had been reading that week, entitled, "*Here, all Dwell Free*" (by Gertrud Mueller Nelson)

The rainbow that appears between storm and sunshine is the place of peace that we know sometimes – even now and can know any day – when we stand in the right place at the right time, allowing two opposite realities to meet and merge and bring to birth what is new and salvific. (a new creation if you will). Storm and sunshine are not "resolved" but necessary to one another for the rainbow's appearance.

Coincidence? A three times storm, sunshine and rainbow and then reading this paragraph in this book? You be the judge, but I must admit that I felt as if Someone was succeeding in getting my attention. More about that later.

Palm Sunday today and Holy week this week.

The sunshine of parade, donkey, palm branches, children and adults singing Hosanna, that sounds like praise and celebration but is really a cry for help, in the shadow/storm of the week that begins immediately following this with Jesus overturning the tables in the temple, the colossal betrayal, arrest, trial and eventual murder by the State.

This is the week each year where the sunshine and storm of Jesus' story are in closest proximity to each other – all the goodness and beauty and saving significance of Jesus' life and ministry on the one hand - the way he talked with people, healed their blindness, made lame to walk, forgave sins, even raised people from the dead, culminating in this parade where the people could conceal under Roman noses their messianic hope that God would once again act redemptively, that God would return and visit God's people and save them from their oppressor.

All this sunshine on the one hand as I said

and on the other

the storm that was about to rain hail and bend trees sideways in the form of betrayal of all of the 12 named disciples, most memorably Judas with a kiss and Peter who says he doesn't know the man, the unjust trial, the shame and humiliation of crown of thorns, purple robe, mocking and flogging and in the end crucifixion and death.

What is the meaning of it all?

Why, we ask, did it have to be this way - all that goodness and all that suffering?

Things are hard under oppressive ruling systems, but people get by don't they?

Jesus lived a good life, a morally upright life. Wouldn't that have been good enough for us to follow and imitate him? Couldn't he save us with the sunshine bits – the healing, the feeding, the compassion, the raising from the dead?

Why the storm? Why the suffering?

Ever since it happened we have wanted to and sometimes even try to avoid facing the storm part of this story – especially the most difficult part of all – substitutionary atonement – the idea that somehow the suffering of an innocent man took the burden of sin from the rest of us, where our sins - individual and corporate were crucified with him on that cross.

This atonement theory didn't materialize out of nowhere. It can quite legitimately be found in the way in which the gospel writers applied to Jesus their Jewish messianic hope found in the Suffering Servant songs in Isaiah. Jews of the time were looking for someone – a messenger or servant from God to redeem them, to save them from their sins and from oppression and to lead them into freedom. We often just point to their hope that Jesus would save them from the Romans, and certainly that's a very practical hope, but if they knew about Isaiah's

suffering servant then they also knew the rest of Isaiah and probably Jeremiah which reminded them over and over again that they were being saved or redeemed not only from foreign ruling powers but also from the ways that they themselves had lived unjustly, sinfully, especially when they didn't take care of the poorest of the poor among them the stranger, the widow and the orphan.

Isaiah 50:4-9, which was read for us today, is a portion of the third of four suffering servant songs in Isaiah and we know that Matthew thought of Jesus as fulfilling that messianic hope already when he quotes the first of the suffering servant songs in Matthew 12:18-21 - taken from Isaiah 42:1-4,9, "Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. (of course that echoes in all the gospels in Jesus' baptism and transfiguration. It continues) I will put my Spirit upon him and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory. And in his name all the nations will hope."

The fourth servant song is particularly poignant during Passion Week and close to how the NT writers understood Jesus' significance, Here is just a portion of it:

Isaiah 53:4-12 (read verse 6,7,8 and 12)

The most important question about these suffering servant songs and how this applies to Jesus is not – who did Isaiah mean when he or his disciples penned these words, although that’s often been debated but “what did they mean?”

How did these servant songs, suffering servant who bears the sins of many and made intercession for the transgressors, function in the story of Israel and in the story of the Christians who are grafted into that story by Jesus’ life death and resurrection?

What these servant songs are is part of the bigger picture of God’s desire to redeem, to save, to free, not only Israel but through them – all the nations from sin and oppression.

From the time of Sarah and Abraham who were blessed in order to be a blessing until Jesus who was understood as a light to the nations.

As I prepared this sermon I reread Isaiah chapter 40 to 55 in order to get a sense of the context of the suffering servant songs.

And over and over again we hear God’s desire to redeem. “I am the Redeemer the Holy One of Israel” is a common phrase throughout.

This redeeming God teaches, equips and sustains the servant in order to fulfill God’s redemptive purpose, God’s desire to reconcile all people of all nations to God’s self.

Now, I'm saying that word "redemption and redeeming" over and over again, and we've heard it many times and I don't blame you if you're asking yourself, let's get to the heart of it. What does it mean? How can I explain it? Actually, I felt that I needed to address it, because I heard that in November when a redemptive path was proposed, people were asking, "what needs to be redeemed?" Well, we do, but that's another thing, so I thought it was important to speak to that word "redemptive."

There are three Hebrew words for redemption in the OT.

The first means to cover over sin –as in not sweep under a rug but to not hold sins against someone.

The second meaning in the OT is to ransom from slavery or bondage as in redeem the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

The third and the one used most often in Isaiah is the one that implies a relationship. One relative redeems another family member from disgrace or provides for their needs (think of the story of Boaz and Ruth). God in relationship with God's people redeems them from disgrace and provides what they need.

The suffering servant is part of God's plan of redemption not because (and this is the atonement bit) not because God demands payment for sins but because God through the servant takes the sins and brokenness of humanity into God's self. God suffers with God's servant and through that servant God suffers with us all. And when

applied to Jesus whom we know as God with us, Emmanuel, God took the sins of the world upon God's self because of God's relationship with us and compassion for us. Compassion as you may know literally means "with passion" or "with suffering." There was no other way.

The sunshine bits and the storm bits of our Judeo Christian story recognize the reality of being human and of being part of human communities.

The human predicament of which we are all part is that our relationships are sometimes broken, our relations with God with others and with the created order and this brokenness (or sin) is cumulative and leads to death.

This is why we need redeeming.

Getting back to the story with which I began.

How did the storm and sunshine function in my life and by extension in the life of this congregation in the past year?

The sunshine, for me were the good bits – the self-realization of my orientation, the beauty of newfound love, richer and deeper than anything I had previously imagined in the light of new truth.

But the storm was something that raged alongside that sunshine.

The storms for me at first were my own fears and wonderings and questions about brokenness and sin and impossible decisions.

My fears and wonderings and questions were then mirrored in at least part of the congregation? All of the questions that you asked and wondered and feared and raged about already lived in my own head. (just sayin')

My time in Pembroke, where I began this story, was a precious time. It was the gift that sought to strengthen and prepare me to take this journey with all of you.

And as violent as storms are at times – frankly some of this journey was violent - when people reacted out of fear and anger and judgmental questions, I was hurt, and some of you hurt each other. Some of our relationships have been broken. In November I acknowledged that I knew that my life-transition was hard on all of you and I know that some of my decisions hurt you but I was also hurt, and therefore relationships were broken. I lost leaves and branches that have left scars that I will carry with me when I leave, just as all LGBTQ people before me have – even though comparatively speaking this storm was not nearly as bad as some previous ones. We barely know actually, as congregations, and here I'm part of the we, we barely know how many LGBTQ folks wounded by church communities

experienced their wounds as so unbearable that they left the church silently or even worse chose suicide rather than try to live without community and that community's God who would not accept them. I am part of that. I am part of a church community where LGBTQ folks have not always been welcome. Many branches of the community were lost, destroyed and cut off in its previous storms. And I did not do what I needed to do to prevent those. And even in this one, though not as severe, we as a community have lost leaves and branches as some have left because of words said in anger and fear and judgment of each other.

And yet, this is the reality of being human, it is our human predicament if you will. Storm and sunshine are essentially part of what it is to live.

And in the words that I read, the rainbow – the hope and the promise of something better, from the time of Noah, the promise of the new creation does not resolve that paradox.

Storm and sunshine are not “resolved” but necessary to one another for the rainbow's appearance.

And the storm and sunshine in this community continues.

There a few voices among us who do not want talk of grace and mercy to supersede talk of discipleship and accountability.

And I agree.

Grace and mercy do not cancel the need for discipleship and accountability. Thanks be to God. Both are essential. They are not resolved but rather live in tension with each other precisely for the good of the community. I understand that current talk of grace and mercy among us is an attempt to correct a centuries old imbalance where Mennonites have traditionally not spent enough time considering the grace of God and how it functions in our lives and in our communities, but yes, these things need to live in tension.

So, where does that leave us?

All of this leaves us with a God who through God's suffering servant, in Christ Jesus, showed us love

first through teaching, preaching, healing and raising from the dead and then through a willingness to take on the suffering of the world, all of its sin and brokenness, all of our storms, into death and the cross.

We live that story this week – with the sunshine of Palm Sunday and the horrors of Holy week.

Essentially God through Christ, the anointed one, walked through the worst of humanity's brokenness, the worst that we can do to each

other, and seem to need to do to each other, he took that suffering upon himself without retaliation – ultimately to secure our redemption,

and so that the gift of the rainbow hope and promise of the new creation that followed would be equally as real as our joy and pain have been – all those times that the storms either soaked us completely or had us hunkering down in the lee of whatever shelter we could find.

All that we can do to each other even in the church could be transformed in him through the events we remember this week. As Christina reminded us last week, we are not the ones who have the power to restore the branches that have been sheared off in our storms. We do not have that power – only the one who brings life – the one who restores life, the one who redeems can do that.

Our redemption resides in both the storm and the sunshine and the gift of the rainbow of promise and hope made possible by the existence of both of the others.

Jesus shows us the way. The sunshine of palm Sunday parade, and the storm of Holy week, will give way to the redemption that God plans for all of us. Thanks be to God.