

Passing the Test

Matthew 26:69-75

March 16, 2008

Sermon preached by Rev. Donald Ng at the First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco.

In the early years of my childhood, Palm Sunday was Palm Sunday. Jesus entered Jerusalem; then he had a parade and a party. There was no reading of any passion stories. It was a celebratory Sunday, a kind of a running start into Easter Sunday. As I saw it, Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday went hand in hand—one high triumph reaching toward the other. Reading a passion narrative on Palm Sunday would be a downer.

For you who have been at church for the past five weeks have heard somber messages of doubting disciples, questioning religious leaders, unbelieving family members of the man born blind, a woman whose past was full of shame and embarrassment, grieving family members who have lost their brother. When we come to church on Palm Sunday, we are looking finally for a celebratory note.

With Holy Week ahead of us, Maundy Thursday on Thursday, Good Friday services on Friday, even a memorial service in an actual cemetery on Saturday, can't we just have a parade and a party today? Couldn't we just stop, catch our breath, dry our eyes and share this one shining moment of joy and leave the reading of those heart-wrenching passion stories to those die-hard Christians who come on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday?

But if we read today's Scripture lessons assigned for this Palm Sunday, it is the longest passage ever—Matthew 26:14—27:66, a total of 127 verses! When I read these verses, I came to realize that it's in the passion stories is where we can see our own lives and faith experiences reflected in the characters that inhabit the drama. What comes between the hosannas and the hallelujahs is the passion story of people very much like us making human decisions, having emotions of fear, pain, trust, courage, loneliness, hurt, loyalty, betrayal, suffering, suspense, doubt, and hope. In other words, we see life.

Servant Girls

From these many verses, we read only 7 of them. Most of the time we read these verses to learn that Peter indeed denied that he knew Jesus three times. We don't remember who asked him but only that as Jesus predicted, Peter would fail to admit that he was a disciple of Jesus three times. But when we look a bit closer, we see that two servant girls, minor characters in the story of the passion of Christ question Peter after the arrest of Jesus. These servant girls were "bit players," yet they forced Peter into his thrice denial of his Lord.

They don't have actual names. They only appear here—young women who are in the service industry; perhaps cleaning house or cooking meals or serving a cold drink to a visitor who comes to places where they served. Maybe these servant girls were on their way home after work.

Let me set the scene. It is late at night, toward the end of this Holy Week. It is after the last supper when Jesus had gathered with his disciples in an upper room. The Passion of Christ has begun. The soldiers have seized Jesus and have led him away to the palace. At the palace, Jesus stands before Pontius Pilate and is on trial. But out in the darkness, in the courtyard, down below, another trial takes place. Judge and jury at that trial are the servant girls.

Although we don't know much about them, these two servant girls, insignificant, name-less, powerless, minor characters in the story put Peter, the premier disciple to the test.

Earlier in the evening, when Jesus and his disciples were in the upper room at dinner, Peter declared that he would stick with Jesus, no matter what. Jesus had said to his disciples, "All of you will fall away." Peter blurted out, "Though all the rest of these losers will desert you, I am behind you all the way, Jesus." As it turned out, he was behind Jesus, far, far, behind Jesus. When the soldiers came to take Jesus, all the disciples fled into the darkness. Peter kept behind at a safe distance. But though he could not closely follow Jesus, he couldn't leave him either. He therefore ends up, in the middle of the night, in a courtyard where some of the soldiers warm themselves around a fire.

And there in the courtyard, these two servant girls put Peter through the test. "You also were with the Galilean," the first one says. And Peter replies, "I do not know what you are talking about." Peter was trying to get away from his questioner went out to the porch where another servant girl declared that Peter was with Jesus of Nazareth. Peter, the one whom Jesus had nicknamed, "the rock," the premier disciple, the one who had been with Jesus from the very first and had heard all of his teaching and observed all of his action, Peter says to her, "I do not know the man." When the bystanders heard Peter, they got into the act and say, "Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you." Peter acting defensively says, "I didn't even know the man."

For the role of minor characters, the servant girls with no power or stature in the community but in three short sentences have completely crushed the rock. They forced Peter to deny Jesus, not once, but three times. And Peter stumbles out into the darkness beyond the fire to keep warm and weeps like a baby.

For such minor characters in the passion of Christ, these servant girls interrogated the premier disciple of them all by making Peter testify to show what he was made out of. It was Peter's final exam and most important test. And he flunked.

Taking the Test

All of us here probably took an examination at least once in our lives. We learn to study and remember facts when we are actually studying with others. We test each other with probable questions. We learn to verbalize answers and in turn begin to internalize and remember answers. By helping each other to articulate answers, we would be more confident to pass the test.

It's like how we know the Lord's Prayer or the Doxology or for the 10:05 congregation the singing of "Blest Be that Binds Our Hearts" after the Lord's Supper. While it's in the bulletin, we are able to recite these prayers and sing these songs because we have done so for so many times that we know them in our hearts. These things become what we affirm as our faith.

Now while we are here with others who share our faith traditions and practices, we are able to recite them. We are safe in the confines of the church. We are protected in this fortress-like brick building with its thick walls. We say these prayers and we sing our hymns and songs, and we affirm our faith. But then we go out. And out there, out there is the test. And the faith we have tried to keep private is forced to go public.

We too are out in the courtyard or on that porch and we are being interrogated about our faith. Are we able to admit that we are Jesus' disciples? Or are we going to be like Peter who Jesus nicknamed, "the

rock” on which he was to build his church and when we are asked if we knew Jesus, might we flunk the test too?

There’s a real story of a college student who went to his campus chaplain telling him that he wasn’t getting along with his roommate. The chaplain asked him why, and he said, “Because he is a Muslim and I’m not.” The chaplain asked him how that made a difference. And the student said, “When we moved in together, he asked me what my religion was. I told him that I was a Christian. A Baptist—I told him that my family wasn’t the best of Christians and that they only went to church occasionally and it wasn’t that big a deal to me. My roommate has this nasty habit of asking embarrassing questions.”

“What sort of questions? The chaplain asked. “Well after we had roomed together a few weeks, he asked me, “Why do you Christians never pray?”

“I told him, ‘We pray a lot. We just sort of keep it to ourselves.’”

“He said, ‘I’ll say that you do. I’ve never seen you pray.’ He prays like a half dozen times a day on his prayer rug in our room, facing East. On a Sunday morning, my roommate asked me, ‘Are you going to your church service today since the Bible teaches us to keep the Sabbath holy?’”

I told him, “Look, I am not the best Christian in the world. You shouldn’t judge the Christian faith by me!”

Upon hearing the student’s torment, the chaplain said, “Well how should he judge the Christian faith? I think I need to write your Muslim roommate a thank-you note. If he keeps working on you with these questions, he may make you into a real Christian after all.”

The servant girls gave Peter the opportunity to testify to what he believed, to take the faith into the real world. And he flunked. The world is quite right in judging Jesus by the sort of lives he is able to produce.

When I was in college, I became a pacifist. After reading the Scriptures and seeing that Jesus was a pacifist, pacifism was the only Christian way that I know. Initially, I had these ideas in my head, but I really didn’t have pacifism in my heart yet. So in conversation with people, with my pastor, with my family, writing my conscientious objector’s position paper for the local draft board, I began to say, “I am a Christian pacifist. I think this is the way of Jesus.”

When I did this, I met some of the most offensive people I’ve known, people who would automatically move into their anti-pacifist arguments. “Well what would you do if your wife and family were being attacked by somebody, would you just stand there and not defend them? Were we wrong to declare war against Ho Chi Min? On and on.

After a year or so of this interrogation, forcing me to come up with arguments for my belief in pacifism, demanding that I think things through, that I repeat my convictions again and again, after about a year of this, I said, “I was a pacifist.” These offensive, antagonistic people had, through their challenges and questions, made me into a true believer.

Maybe each of us, if we are to follow Jesus, need not only a prayer partner or a Bible study group, but also someone like the insignificant, minor characters in the passion stories, servant girls who are here to question us, challenge us, and to make us say what we believe.

Passing the Test

When I first came to FCBC ten years ago, I was somewhat surprised to see how many steps one needs to take before becoming a church member. Without counting the Sunday school classes, Day Camp, Youth Camp, retreats, a young person would take a basics class from Pastor Chris. Following that, a person would take a 6-week Inquirers Class from me. He would complete a new member application form. The candidate is interviewed by the Deacons where he would be questioned about his Christian experience. Once approved by the Deacons Board, he is introduced to the congregation in a Membership Meeting to give a testimony. After this, he is asked to leave the room so that the membership can vote for approval.

One needs to pass a test to join this church! We have all served as servant girls asking those probing questions of “Aren’t you with Jesus of Nazareth? Certainly you are also one of them?”

When our faith is on the line, we must testify to what we believe. And in time, we become a witness to the strength of our convictions. The four persons who were baptized today testified to their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. The more they practice their faith in safety of these thick walls will eventually lead them to go outside in the courtyards and porches of the world and claim that they do know Jesus Christ who is Lord.

I expect as you go forth from the safe confines of this fortress of faith, this Holy Week, that there is a good chance that somewhere, sometime, you will meet someone like these servant girls. They may expose the vulnerability of your faith. They forced Peter out in the open. He flunked the test that night. But after the crucifixion of Jesus, and after his resurrection, the Risen Christ appears to Peter. He forgives him, blesses him, and puts him in charge of the genesis of the church.

And if you happen to flunk the test this week, Jesus will forgive you too. He will bless you and empower you again to testify to the truth that you do know Jesus and that you are one of his disciples. In time, you will pass the test.

Tradition has it that Peter paid for his faith by being crucified upside down. When it counted, at the end, Peter was the “rock” Jesus meant him to be. He passed the test.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, as you journey this week toward your trial and crucifixion, we journey behind you, far behind you. We witness your sovereignty and serenity as you face the powers of evil and death and marvel at your glorious triumph over those powers. Lord Jesus, pray for us during our times of trial, when we fail the tests that are put before us. Strengthen us in our faith and preserve us in our witness to you before the difficulties of the world. Give us, good Lord, some of your strength in the face of temptation. Amen.