HAIL THE CONQUERING HERO

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on April 17, 2011

Crossroads United Church, Kingston, Ontario

Psalm 31:9-16

Father Damien was the first priest sent by his bishop to serve a leper colony in Molokai, Hawaii in 1873. In 1884 while preparing to bathe he placed his foot in scalding water so hot that it burned his foot and caused it to blister, but Fr. Damien felt nothing. It was the first that he realized that he had contracted the disease. According to myth, on the Sunday following the realization, he ascended into the pulpit and began his sermon differently. Heretofore he had started his sermon with the words, “My brethren” On this Sunday he began it by saying, “We lepers.” It was his way of sharing with his people that he too had contracted the disease. It was a moment of solidarity, I daresay, fraught with great emotion: faith, hope, fear and love.

This story always gives me pause. Living as we do in an era where “Not In My Backyard” is the prevailing sentiment, and when we admire stoicism over vulnerability, and vested self interest over communal need it is awe inspiring to be reminded of those who have quite literally picked up the cross for the sake and glory of Christ. Think of those persons within your family, community and social circle who have been diagnosed with life threatening disease, or who live under the weight of economic and social hardship and who seem to be uncomplaining and grateful for life, and you, too,will be in awe of the grace, faith and tenacity that some exhibit. Life can turn on a dime-even for those of us who do not subject ourselves to possible illness by volunteering to work in a hostile environment. Sometimes we do everything right and still we get diagnosed with disease, or lose our jobs, or live with uncertainty. The phrase from verse 15 of the Psalm reminds that no one lives entirely to the self: my times are in your hands.

It is a fitting Psalm to ponder on Passion Sunday which begins with the glory of the triumphal entry and culminates in the passion that unfolds with Holy Week. In the

space of one week we shall move from glory to glory: the glory of the triumphal entry behind us and the glory of the resurrection before us. But in between the triumphal entry and the empty tomb, we shall also be reminded of how fickle the madding crowd can be; and how the cries for a scapegoat can usurp the praise of resounding hosanna.

He will be betrayed by one of his own disciples for the head price of thirty pieces of silver.

We shall observe in awed silence as he shares his last meal with his disciples.

We will hang our heads in solidarity of shame as we watch Peter pledge his undying support, only to watch him deny even knowing him when his own security and life is threatened.

We will ache with him as he prays in anguish in the garden prior to his arrest. And we will experience a nigglesome guilt as his disciples fall asleep rather that stay awake and pray.

We shall see his appeals for support in his hour of loneliness go unheeded by his best friends.

We shall watch in stunned silence as he is betrayed, denied, and forsaken by those that he most trusted.

We will wince as he is slapped by the high priest and spat upon by the temple guard.

We will watch as Pilate washes his hands of his fate and future.

We will hear of his being stripped virtually naked and made to wear a regal robe and a crown of thorns in mockery.

We will hear him cry out to God, “Why have you forsaken me?” And in selfishness and self pity we will wonder if God forsakes us in our generation as God seemed to turn a blind eye to the suffering of the only born son. We may wonder are my times truly in your hands or not? Is God among us or not? Is God all powerful or not? We want the vision of the conquering hero and many would prefer that Palm Sunday be just about triumphant glory and not the springboard to his passion. We can hail the conquering hero but turn a blind eye to the suffering that follows, just as we may blame God for the suffering of those we love when disease is diagnosed, and uncertainty

prevails and social and economic strain is not transformed.

I know that there are some within this community that do not like me talking about the fact that Michael and I lost a child to cancer, but on Ash Wednesday in 1997 she was given 2-3 months to live and her death came on the eve of Pentecost. Even though the dates do not always match up I cannot help but be reminded of her faith, courage and tenacity during Lent, Holy Week and the season of Easter that follows.. She became for me the Christological figure who accepted her fate with grace and did not bury her head in the sand as she lived with a very limited future. She picked up the cross and stumbled under its weight but did not lament her fate. The triumph of her life has not come to an end with her death. She lived her life-despite her youth-daring to believe that her times were in the hands of God. God continues to hold in those creative and magnanimous hands all of creation, and like a master crafter, continues to bring life from death, and hope from despair and new beginnings from seeming endings.

On my desk is a piece of pottery that was painted and encrypted with hopeful witticisms-the gift of one of my living children on Mother's Day. It stands as a symbol of both creativity and as testament to the inspiration that the Angel of Death, transformed by faith, has brought to our family, who shared the experience with us. She has written: “If you want the rainbows you have got to put up with the rain”. And, “You can complain that roses have thorns or rejoice that thorns have roses.” We all know that the glory of triumphal entry can transition to the agony of suffering and death, just as suffering and death can transition to the glory of new life, and resurrection. And we are sustained and steadied in the agony and the ecstasy by the loving hands of God.

We celebrate this day the glory of the triumphal entry and next Sunday we will celebrate the glory of resurrection and new life. But between the two stages of glory we shall know agony that is almost beyond comprehension. This is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.