



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

In the Line of Fire

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Prelude to a Great Drama

So there was a parade. It was a pretty big deal. Nearly the entire population of the capital city swarmed the crowded streets as the procession snaked its way through to the big public square called the Temple. At the head of the caravan was the most famous and controversial figure in all of the nation at that time. He was literally riding a donkey, but figuratively riding the crest of a tidal wave of popularity. People lining the streets waved branches, their equivalent of the American ticker-tape parade down Broadway. And yet the storm clouds of hatred from his threatened enemies (the political establishment) were already darkening the horizon.

But we will not focus only on the events of that day, because the truly important—dare I say, world-changing—events would come later in the week. The Palm Sunday parade merely set the stage, grabbed everyone's attention.

We're used to this. It happens with many great dramas—the fictional kind as well as the factual.

- ✦ The opening scene of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's magnum opus, grabs the audience's attention by the throat. The title character, a grieving young Danish prince, walks the castle battlements at night. Suddenly, he is mesmer-

ized and terrified by the appearance of the ghost of his dead father, directing Hamlet to take revenge on his killer. The scene, when properly done, catches your breath. But it's just setting us up for greater action that will come later.

- ✦ Do you recall the beginning of the first Indiana Jones adventure film, entitled *Raiders of the Lost Ark*? The intrepid American archaeologist lifts a sacred stone from a lost temple deep in the jungle of Latin America, then runs from dart-throwing natives, jumps in a river, and holds on to a float plane as it soars away. It's an exciting beginning. But the plot of the rest of the film has nothing to do with that opening; most of it occurs in the Egyptian desert, searching for the biblical Ark of the Covenant. The opening scene is simply there to grab our attention.

In the same way, Palm Sunday's dramatic parade is just the opening act of a great tragedy that becomes a triumph of historic and cosmic dimensions. The story of human redemption is played out during that Holy Week in the city of Jerusalem. And just as no drama or film critic would focus only on the opening scenes of a Shakespearean play or a movie, so we today must move on in our minds to what follows.

Scripture Reading

The Scripture passage we will consider, written years after the events of Holy Week, puts into simple but profound perspective what it all means to us. A man named Paul (who may or may not have witnessed the Jerusalem parade) wrote the following words to explain what was really important about that fateful week, in a letter we call Romans.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. —Romans 5:6-8



From this brief passage, there are three things I want us to notice about the events of the death and resurrection of Jesus in that original Holy Week. The gospel story reveals three “R’s”:

1. A Right Timing
2. A Role Reversal
3. A Reassurance of our Value

A Right Timing

Verse 6 of Romans chapter 5 says, “You see, **at just the right time...**” something very important happened. God orchestrated everything, coordinated it all, brought it all together, in just the right way at just the right moment, to accomplish the plan He had set in motion thousands of years earlier. It all fit—though no one in Jerusalem those days could quite see how it all was working together.

In fact, we can see now that the history of the civilized world had been orchestrated to make Christ’s coming at the best possible time. Improved travel, relative world peace, a common language, and the scattering of Jewish expatriates around the Roman world (the Jewish Diaspora) would greatly facilitate the spreading of the news of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and their life-altering consequences.

One of the fascinations and delights I find in studying history is that we occasionally see just such a remarkable intersection. Though the events of our own times seem to unfold randomly and chaotically, looking back at them through the lens of knowledge allows us to make sense of it all. History records a number of occasions where the exact right person arrived at the exact critical moment—an amazing confluence of right timing.

I believe this was the case with some of our greatest national heroes. No one but George Washington could have held the Continental Army together long enough to defeat Britain and win our independence. No one but Abraham Lincoln could have preserved the union and ended slavery. No one in the foreign policy establishment in 1980 could see any way forward other than constant global chess against the Soviet Union until Ronald Reagan articulated a new approach to the Cold War: “We win, they lose.” History shows what can happen when the right person comes at the right time. And that’s what Romans 5 says occurred during Holy Week.

A Role Reversal

In addition to right timing, the gospel events display for us a stunning and unimaginable role reversal. In the 1993 film *In the Line of Fire*, actor Clint Eastwood played Secret Service agent Frank Horrigan, a veteran of over three decades of protecting the life of the President of the United States.

Horrigan was a young rookie agent with President Kennedy on that fateful day in Dallas in 1963; at the moment the shots were fired, he froze in shock. For 30 years he has wrestled with the ultimate question for a Secret Service man: Can I take a bullet for the President? When the moment comes, will I actually

risk my life to save another? In a dramatic scene at the end of the movie, he does what he had been unable to do 30 years earlier: he throws himself into the path of an assassin's bullet, is wounded, but saves the life of his Chief Executive.

It's a challenging, even frightening, thought to consider: Would you or I ever be willing to give our lives to save someone else? Secret Service agents vow to do so, because they believe that the person they are protecting—the one who holds the highest office in the land, the leader of the free world—is so valuable that it would be worth giving up their life to save his. But they would not take a bullet for just anyone.

And this basic assumption is what verse 7 confirms: that perhaps there might be a rare situation, like a Secret Service agent taking a bullet for the President, where someone would willingly give their life for another ("... though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die"). But that's an extraordinary act to even contemplate—and the person you're saving had better be worth it!

What we read about in verse 8, however, is one of the most shocking and incomprehensible sacrifices ever. For here we find the exact opposite of what a Secret Service agent vows to do for his President. Instead, the President of the whole Universe, God Himself in human flesh, actually took a bullet for you and me! He, the most lofty, noble and perfect Man who ever lived, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, sacrificed His life willingly to save people who had no inherent goodness, no worth, no claim whatsoever. He died on that cross in our place, paying the penalty for our sins, taking the bullet meant for me and you! Talk about a role reversal!

A Reassurance of Our Value

The third message we gain from the cross is a reassurance or confirmation of our great value. No matter how we feel about ourselves, no matter what we've done or not done, the stupendous reality is that we are deeply loved and forgiven.

God has created human beings in such a way that we all long to feel that we have worth, and we all long to be secure and confident that we are unconditionally accepted. But the world we are born into doesn't always meet those needs. Sometimes our families fail at their most basic responsibility of giving us that sense of security and worth. Sometimes our experiences in school and in jobs, in sports and in social groups can deliver the message to us that we fail, we're not important, we don't measure up, we don't matter. Life is filled with things that tear down our value and worth. No matter how hard a shell we develop to protect us from hurt, deep inside we're always at least a little bit vulnerable, and we always need to be loved and accepted.

Love can be promised to us. Love can be spoken and verbalized. Those are nice to receive. But the most powerful communication of love comes when that love is demonstrated by action. Words can be cheap. But when a person sacrifices something valuable and precious for us, it makes us feel that we are of value to them.

The city where I used to live had a major world-class medical center that had become a leader in the field of organ transplant. One of my church members worked at that hospital, and regularly shared with me some of the incredible stories she heard from the transplant unit, among patients she had gotten to know personally through caring for them. I remember one

about a young woman in her 30's with failed kidneys. She was on dialysis, getting weaker and weaker, and the only hope was a kidney transplant. Where to find a donor match? The woman couldn't bring herself to ask any of her relatives to sacrifice a part of their own body for her. But a sister willingly offered to be tested, and when the match was confirmed that sister insisted on donating one of her kidneys for the transplant.

It was a huge sacrifice, of course: the sister had to take off weeks from work and from her own family, had to undergo the pain of surgery and recovery, and put herself at risk in the future if she ever had kidney problems. Nevertheless, that sister made the commitment out of love. The sick woman who received the kidney commented to the nurse, "I always believed that my family loved me, but now I know it." That's the power of a love that isn't just spoken but demonstrated in a concrete, sacrificial way: It reassures us completely that we are loved.

That, Romans 5 says, is what the cross should say to you and me. God didn't just *promise* to love you, or *tell* you He loves you. He **proved it**, demonstrating through a personal sacrifice far greater even than giving up a kidney. He gave His life for you. That's how precious you are to Him, how much He values you. If you ever get to feeling lonely or unimportant or unloved, just look at the cross. It is God's unforgettable demonstration of His love, the proof that you are of infinite worth.

Conclusion

We have Holy Week ahead of us to think and reflect and remember what the Lord has done for us. Before we get to the triumph and celebration of Easter, we need to remember what came before it:

The only road to Resurrection is through Crucifixion.

Easter makes no sense without Good Friday preceding it. My prayer for you is that this week will be a time when the meaning of Christ's sacrifice for you becomes clearer than ever. My prayer is that, out of love and gratitude, you will dedicate—or re-dedicate—your life to Him. ■

