

Sightings Palm Sunday

Psalm 118

- ¹O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!
- ²Let Israel say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”
- ¹⁹Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.
- ²⁰This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.
- ²¹I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
- ²²The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
- ²³This is the Lord’s doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
- ²⁴This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
- ²⁵Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!
- ²⁶Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
We bless you from the house of the Lord.
- ²⁷The Lord is God, and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.
- ²⁸You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.
- ²⁹O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

John 12:12-16

- ¹²The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.

¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!”

¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: ¹⁵“Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

¹⁶His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

The Sermon

In the Spring of 2016, Keisha Thomas received a phone call informing her that a man she did not know named Albert McKeel had died.

The call was from Mr. McKeel’s son, whom she did know. He had introduced himself to her in a coffee shopⁱ back in 1996, a few months after Keisha, an African American woman, had seen the elder Mr. McKeel, a white man and white supremacist, fall to the ground at a KKK rally, at which point several anti-KKK activists who had been chasing him had begun to attack him.

Ms. Thomas, an 18-year-old high school student, had jumped between the attackers and Mr. McKeel, covered him to shield him with her body, and absorbed the blows until they stopped coming.

That Mr. McKeel never acknowledged Ms. Thomas’s action. But his son did. And twenty years after she had jumped to the defense of a man who had no reason on earth to hate her, but did, and no excuse under heaven to harm her, but would have been happy to, the son called Keisha to give her the news that the man she had protected that day in 1996 had died.

During that phone call, the younger man put his younger sister on the phone, and she said: Ms. Thomas, I might not be alive today if you hadn't done what you did on that day.ⁱⁱ

And Keisha Thomas later said, “When I heard that, I thought this was the future and the past of what peace has created... The real accomplishment of all this to me is to know that his son and daughter don't share [his racist] views. History didn't repeat itself. That's what gives me hope that the world can get better from generation to generation.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!”

Jesus rode in on a young donkey, although as usual in John, his disciples didn't get the Biblical, or the theological, or certainly the Christological nuances.

They would only start to put it all together later, afterward, when they looked back and thought about everything that happened—the procession, the supper, the mob mentality, the cross—and especially
the lamb who knew exactly what was happening, and why;
the king who made himself the willing sacrifice.

It would be nice—it would be more than nice; it would be some comfort, which is a theological issue—to think that Jesus' example of self-sacrifice is one that were still emulated today.

The blaring media-driven complaints of the self-righteous and those who are terrified of losing their historical advantages would suggest
that the age of compassion and self-giving is over;
that redemption is a lost cause;
that beauty is only to be exploited,

and that by the time truth has been run through all of its individualizing sifters, it is only one person's truth or another person's truth, tailored to individual preferences, as has already long since happened to more mundane phenomena such as "knowledge" of "facts."

But the gospel we celebrate insists that God's truth and beauty have no expiration date and are not for sale at any price. And I submit to you that the evidence is everywhere.

And so, by way of testimony, if it please the court, I offer you the following sightings as exhibits A through however many I have time to tell you about.

If you are moved by any of the following testimony—if anything you hear makes you want to say, "Hallelujah"—I invite you to wave a palm frond.

You may be someone who finds yourself so powerfully moved that you set aside inhibitions and wave it high. You may be Presbyterian about it and just kind of flick it half a centimeter on your lap. Or you may be a contemplative and just wave the thing *in your mind*. Or you may not be moved to anything at all. It's up to you.

I submit to you the following as evidence that it is yet possible to move the needle in this world.

✠ In the 1992-93 college basketball season, there was a basketball player for the University of Iowa named Chris Street. During the Christmas break, the sports world was stunned and heartbroken when in the middle of the basketball season, Chris Street died in a car accident.

Among his exceptional accomplishments, Chris Street held the University of Iowa record for consecutive free throws made, across several games, at 34. That streak was still going when Christ Street died.

This season, an Iowa player named Jordan Bohannon tied that record, and in a late February game against Northwestern, late in the game, he was fouled and went to the free throw line with a chance to break the record.

Unnoticed by many at the time, before shooting it, Bohannon, without fanfare, pointed to the sky. When the shot bounced off the front of the rim, at first the announcers didn't know what to make of it, but gradually they caught on. Jordan Bohannon never misses a free throw that badly. With the parents of Chris Street in attendance that night, Jordan Bohannon had deliberately missed, to keep himself from setting a new record and preserve Chris Street's name at the top of the all-time list.

That would be remarkable in any circumstances, but this intentional miss took place in the last two minutes of a game whose outcome was still uncertain. They could have lost because of that missed free throw.

Asked after the game what he thought about it, Iowa's coach, Fran McCaffery, said, "I think it's awesome."^{iv}

✚ Staying in sports, I remembered an event from just a few years ago where a Major League Baseball game was being played, and a foul ball came back into the stands where a girl almost caught it, but it bounced into a little boy's hands a couple of rows up.

I'm told that catching a foul ball at a baseball game is one of the most exhilarating feelings you could ever have, especially for a little kid.

The camera showed the boy happy, proud, delighted to have made the catch. And then they showed the girl. So disappointed; it seemed like it was *right there* in her hands before it bounced away. For an instant, she thought she was going to have that wonderful feeling, and all parents know the pain of seeing your child disappointed.

And then the camera went back to the boy, and they showed the boy's Mom and Dad talking to him, and he was taking it all in.

Thirty seconds later, the camera was back on the girl, and now the boy had come over and was wordlessly handing the ball to her.

I looked for that footage online and am thrilled to report to you that there are so many stories just like that that I never could find that one. Instead I found something even better: that it happens, maybe not all the time, but enough to produce more than ample evidence.

✚ In baseball, they still remember Pee Wee Reese, the Kentucky-born shortstop whose career was peaking in the late 1940s, around the time Jackie Robinson, the first African-American player allowed into the Major Leagues, was brought onto Reese's team.

Reese later said that meeting Jackie Robinson was the first time he had ever met and shaken hands with a black man.

There's a legendary story that early in Robinson's career, when at every game they played he was regularly showered with intimidating racial abuse, the insults and slurs became almost unbearable in Boston, until white Pee Wee Reese walked across the field and put his arm around Jackie Robinson's shoulder in a gesture that was widely interpreted as saying, if you have a problem with this man, you're going to have a problem with me, and I have a problem with you—and by extension, so do all the other white members of this team.

There's been some mythologizing of that event to the point that the details are hard to pin down, but late in his life, Pee Wee was being interviewed by the baseball historian Roger Kahn about it and said, "I was just trying to make the world a little bit better. That's what you're supposed to do with your life, isn't it?"^v

✠ I was visiting a street ministry in Washington, DC with my youth group from a previous church about ten years ago; it was a storefront church run by an 80-something woman, and they had kind of a thrift-shop window that supported their ministries for the homeless and other people in the inner city.

At one point while some of us were in there doing sorting and other odd jobs, a guy came along, picked up a large TV, and walked off with it. I can't remember the preacher's name, but I remember well that she was not somebody you would mess with.

I watched her go after the guy, and thought, "He's not going to know what hit him." And from half way down the block I could hear her calling after him: "Sir, I can help you."

I saw him stop and turn around and walk with her back to the storefront, still carrying the TV he had just tried to steal.

✠ On a much darker note, I was nine or ten years old when the Son of Sam killings took place in New York City and had the whole nation horrified. When he was finally caught, it made the cover of all the news magazines, and I was looking at one of them in fear and loathing when my Dad changed my life by saying, "You want to hate the guy, but you know he's sick."

"Sick" didn't always used to be a pejorative word, and isn't supposed to be.

✠ Speaking of Dad, he used to go to New York on business trips to make presentations to bigwigs and so on. One time he was up there in the wintertime, and there was ice everywhere, and on his way out of the hotel he slipped and fell backward onto the pavement. He said that in an instant, a man had rushed over to help him—a guy who appeared to be living on the street with nothing at all.

Dad always tells that story with amazement and appreciation—here he is in this fabulous suit and a coat and a briefcase, coming out of a ritzy hotel; and here’s the guy with practically nothing coming over to help him out and make sure he’s OK. If there’s a cynical lens of suspicion to put on that story, Dad never, ever looked at it that way.

✚ In World War II, a Russian scientist named Nicolai Vavilov wanted to be sure no human being ever again died of famine. He and a team gathered hundreds of different kinds of seeds from many countries, in order to preserve and store them safely in the event of famine or other global catastrophe. To that end, they created a top secret seed bank in St. Petersburg which was then known as Leningrad. This was just before the nine-month long Siege of Leningrad, when the whole city was starving, including those scientists. Any one of them could have broken into the store houses and taken those seeds, and maybe you and I would never have known about it. But they would rather give up their lives than give up their mission for the future of humankind.^{vi}

✚ Micah Anderson was 14 years old when he was diagnosed with a rare cancer. He’s been undergoing treatments for several months now. When he was able to go back to school, he was greeted by one thousand fellow students all wearing T-shirts declaring their support for Micah.

✚ Peter Wang was a high school junior active in ROTC. He spoke both English and Chinese. The principal of the school he attended from pre-kindergarten to second grade said he was “a sweet, loving child...very eager to learn.” His parents owned a Chinese restaurant. A friend of the family said he was “very polite” and “smart” and cared about people.^{vii}

On February 14th, a young man with an AR-15 came into Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where Peter was a student, and began shooting. Peter Wang was last seen holding a door open so others could escape.”^{viii}

✠ Two days ago, Lieutenant Colonel Arnaud Beltrame, at his own suggestion, voluntarily traded places with a hostage in a terrorist event at a supermarket in France. He went in unarmed; she came out unharmed. Lt. Col. Beltrame did not make it out but because of him, many others did.

His brother Cedric said, “He gave his life for strangers. He must have known that he didn’t really have a chance. If that doesn’t make him a hero, I don’t know what would.”^{ix}

*Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.
This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.*

Only later, afterward, would the disciples start to put together what Jesus was doing when he came into Jerusalem.

It would be some comfort to think that self-sacrifice was still emulated today. Always there will be evidence to suggest that the age of compassion and self-giving is over;
that redemption is a lost cause;
that beauty is only to be exploited,
that truth can only be tailored to individual preferences.

But the gospel we celebrate insists that God’s truth and beauty have no expiration date and are not for sale at any price. And I submit to you that the evidence is everywhere:

in the way you live your life, the witness you give, the way you do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

We offer testimony to each other and the world that there is hope.

And when we follow him on his way to the cross, all we can say is hallelujah.

Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt.

Keith Grogg
 Montreat Presbyterian Church
 Montreat, NC
 March 25, 2018

ⁱRyan Stanton, "Former Ann Arborite reflects on saving man from beating outside KKK rally" October 31, 2013 at 5:35 AM, updated October 31, 2013 at 12:39 PM(
http://www.mlive.com/news/ann-arbor/index.ssf/2013/10/former_ann_arborite_reflects_o.html)

ⁱⁱ Martin Slagter, "Former Ann Arbor resident reflects on saving man from beating at KKK rally" Updated on June 24, 2016 at 11:57 AM Posted on June 24, 2016 at 11:26 AM
http://www.mlive.com/news/ann-arbor/index.ssf/2016/06/saving_man_from_beating_at_kkk.html)

ⁱⁱⁱ Slagter, "Ann Arbor resident reflects on saving man from beating"

^{iv} <http://www.espn.com/mens-college-basketball/recap?gameId=400986588>

^v http://www.espn.com/blog/playbook/fandom/post/_/id/20917/did-reese-really-embrace-robinson-in-47

^{vi} <http://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2018/02/23/svalbard-global-seed-vault>

^{vii} <http://www.sun-sentinel.com/local/broward/parkland/florida-school-shooting/fl-florida-school-shooting-peter-wang-obit-20180215-story.html>

^{viii} NBC Nightly News, February 15, 2018 <https://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/nightly-news-full-broadcast-feb-15th-1162906691572>

^{ix} "Arnaud Beltrame: France lauds policeman who swapped with hostage" March 24, 2018
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43525267>)