

## **Lemon Trees in a Snowstorm**

John 12:1-8

Good Friday

April 6, 2007

Let me begin this evening by reading to you from the prophecy of Isaiah. In the 43<sup>rd</sup> chapter, we read these words.

This is what the Lord says – he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick; Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a new way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.

This would not be on the list of too many people if they were recording their favorite Bible passages because this is a fairly obscure and difficult passage. This was written to a people in exile. The children of Israel had been taken in chains to Babylon, there to wonder how they would ever be restored to God; there to wonder if God had forgot about them; there to wonder if God cared about them anymore. Their story is pretty much summed up in the 137<sup>th</sup> Psalm. The psalmist wrote these words.

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.  
There on the willows, we hung up our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion.” How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

These are people who are in agony. They have been cut off from their homeland, from their traditions, from the God of their ancestors, from hope itself. But the prophet comes on the scene to remind them that God had heard their groaning. God was aware of their pain. More importantly, God was about to bring them home. God was on the verge of doing something new in their midst.

This was to be expected, really, because God has a history of saving his people. Generations before this time, God has acted among the people as well. Remember how God drew the Egyptians into the Red Sea, to destroy them there and allow the Children of Israel to escape slavery. In the passage from Isaiah, God is telling the people that the Babylonians are about to join the ranks of the defeated, just like Egypt. God is encouraging them to hear, believe, trust, and have hope for the future.

God is telling them that the future is in his hands. So, that being the case, he says that they should trust in God and fill their hearts with hope. God is doing a new thing once again.

What I would like for you to do now is to skip ahead in history about five hundred years or so. Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem in order to meet the fate that awaits him there. He knows that he will never leave that city alive, but presses on because that is what he has been sent to do.

On the way, he found himself in the city of Bethany, not too far from Jerusalem. Bethany, if you remember, is the home of his good friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. At this point, Lazarus has died and has been in the grave for four days. Jesus wept when he remembered his friend, but called to him, and he walked out of the tomb, a further testament to Christ's power over even the grave.

Not too many days later, Jesus was again at Bethany; again at the home of Mary and Martha. They served him dinner and it must have been a glorious occasion because Lazarus was back among them. During dinner, Mary took some very expensive perfume, anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair.

The Scriptures say that Judas was appalled at the waste of money, but I have a real feeling that he wasn't the only one. His reaction is probably just the only one recorded. Why did she waste such an expensive product on his feet? Couldn't it have been put to better use – to feed the poor perhaps?

Jesus cuts through all of this feigned concern for the poor and gets right to the heart of the matter. He tells the assembled folks around that dinner table that she is anointing him for his burial. The cross, after all, lies just a few days in the distance and Mary is preparing him for that trial to come.

Pay attention to Mary for a moment, won't you. Don't you see that there is profound hope in her actions? She is beginning to see that his death is a necessity. She is just beginning to understand that he is going to die so that the rest of humanity might live. I am sure that, at this point in the dinner, she was remembering what Jesus told her just a few days before when he raised Lazarus.

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

Mary was placing her hopes in things that she could not see, yet in things which she trusted completely.

Not so with Judas and the rest of the disciples. They give me the impression of being terribly confused by this whole matter. They were discouraged, I think. Everything for which they had worked was coming to an end. They had signed on with Jesus with the expectation that he would usher in a new age, a new agenda, a new political and social reality. Now, all they could see was that their dream was being dashed by those who wanted their Master dead. They were having so much trouble lifting their eyes out of their disappointment that they couldn't see hope in the future. They saw only the darkness; not the light at the end of the tunnel.

The reason we lose hope is that we often misplace it. We place it on the wrong things. We anchor our hope in those things which we can see, or touch, or hear, or smell, or feel. But real hope is based on so much more than material things.

I would ask you to remember that incident in the ministry of Jesus when he sent seventy of his disciples out into the world to carry on his mission. They came back and told excited stories of casting out demons and healing the sick. Then Jesus told them to put their exuberance into perspective. He told them instead, to rejoice most in the fact that their names were written in the book of life in heaven. He told them not to get so occupied with things in this world that they might lose sight of the world to come. Real hope doesn't come in the material things around us. Real hope comes with the presence of God.

Remember the Israelites in bondage in Babylon. God called out, "It's going to be alright. I am doing a new thing. I will restore you to your rightful place. To these disciples who were waiting for the final hammer blow to snuff out the life of their Lord, God said, "Have hope. I am the resurrection and the life. Believe in me and live."

A few years ago, I was with a group that visited Lazarus' grave in Bethany. It was an unusual February day for Jerusalem and that area. The weather was snowy, cold, and windy. The temperature was just above freezing. The snow didn't last very long. It did indeed get warmer as the day got longer, but at that time the snow was soft and slushy and got our feet wet. I remember walking up that hill to his tomb. On the way, we passed a lemon tree. The branches were covered with an inch or so of snow, but those glorious yellow lemons seemed to me at least, to offer the news that the snow was not going to win.

In the midst of the cold, there was fruit just waiting to be picked. Such is hope, isn't it? Even in the midst of tragedy, God calls out to us that we are not to place our hope in things that can be seen, but in things that are eternal.

This is Good Friday. It derives its name from an Old English word which means "God's Friday." It is Good Friday because this is the day that death was conquered and defeated. It is a somber day, a day of sadness, a day of betrayal, a day of death. This is the day when it would seem that the darkness wins. But we know differently. As we pack our bags with those things we need to meet the risen Christ on Sunday, let's not forget to add hope.

Just as God rescued the Israelites; just as Christ filled the heart of Mary, so Christ tells us not to give up hope. Remember the lemon tree in the snowstorm. Sometimes it is darkest before the dawn. The day looks hard and tough right now. But the resurrection is coming. New life is coming. Salvation is coming. It is Friday, but Sunday is coming.

I imagine that to the outsider, all of this talk of hope in the midst of what seems to be reality, must seem like just so much talk. I know that for the outsider or the unbeliever, it seems that the only things we can hope in are those things we can see.

In a world gone haywire with crime, drugs, AIDS, war, violence, family breakdown, death and destruction, a threatened economy, and the spiritual anchors of our childhood seeming to unravel – it is hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

But on this Good Friday, I would encourage you to remember your history. Remember that God has never let his people down. Remember that when God's people called out for him, he was there...always was, always will be.

Like the lemon that peeks through the snow and promises a brighter day tomorrow; so the resurrection is on the horizon which promises that the pain of this day will be turned to new life at the empty tomb.

Isaiah understood that. Mary understood that. May we understand it as well. May we be encouraged and hopeful, even in the face of ugliness, unfairness, and evil. May we understand that, even on this dark day, God is at work. May we understand that it is Jesus in whom we find our hope. Amen.