

Sermon: Flashback  
Text: John 12:9-19  
Date: March 25, 2018  
Context: WWPC  
Palm Sunday  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

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

John 12:9

How do we become who we are? What shapes us as individuals into the kind of people we eventually become?

If you had asked that question maybe ten years ago, virtually every developmental psychologist everywhere would have given you the same answer:

We are shaped by a combination of nature and nurture. That is, we are born with a particular genetic makeup that determines the basic outline of who we are -- whether we're a girl or a boy, whether we have brown eyes or blue or green, whether we'll grow up to be five feet six or six feet nine. Whether we have an IQ of eighty-eight, or a hundred and eight, or a hundred and sixty-eight.

All that raw genetic material is then further shaped by the environment in which we grow up.

If we're raised to believe in a living God who creates us and loves us, and to believe that, safe within this love, we can do anything we set our mind to do, we'll likely grown up to practice the kind of faith that can move mountains.

If we're raised to believe that people who don't look like us, or think like us, or believe the same things we do, are to be mocked and shunned, we will likely grow up to believe that we are members of a superior race.

The net result of who we are, then, is a combination of nature and nurture: the genetic material that defines our basic outline, and the environmental factors that further shape us. In the world of developmental psychology, this was a kind of orthodoxy, as close as you could get to absolute truth.

Except it's not true. Or at least it's not exhaustively true.

In the last decade or so researchers from a variety of fields have come to the startling conclusion that there is another factor that shapes us every bit as much as the genes with which we are born and the context in which we are raised.

And that factor is story. The stories we hear repeatedly. The stories we learn. The stories we tell ourselves. The stories we believe.

And when I say that stories shape us, I mean that literally. I have mentioned this before, but it bears repeating here today that, over time, the stories we repeatedly tell, these steadily effect the very shape our very brains.

When we hear stories that evoke fear and anger and love and hope and faith, our brain responds as if these stories are true. You can actually see the effect on an MRI.

The emotions we feel, the responses these stories elicit, these are passed down the neural pathways in our brains, strengthening those pathways.

Tell stories filled with anger and fear, and you create the neuroanatomy of anger and fear.

Tell stories of love and hope and faith and you create the neuroanatomy of love and hope and faith.

Which is partly why we've chosen to frame our Lenten journey this year around stories. Particularly around the central stories from the gospel of John.

We wanted to revisit these big gospel narratives to let them do what stories do: to let them continue to shape us and define us, to lay down their tracks, to nurture our belief and strengthen our faith.

Now, today, our Lenten journey, this ridiculous journey we have shared of following a nobody from nowhere, this journey is nearing its end.

We have just Maundy Thursday and Good Friday still to come before we reach the promised land of Easter morning.

Chronologically, the stories we've focused on over the last three Sundays -- Peter's denial, Jesus's two-part interrogation before Pilate -- these come after the one we read today.

So now we're going to take a step back. We're going to flashback to the events that brought us to this dramatic moment in Jesus' life, because this is the day that everything changes.

And looking back, what you immediately see is that the roots of the central conflict on display in today's story go all the way back to the beginning.

The authorities started a file on this man early on. They've had their eyes on him from the start. From that day when he first turned water into wine, when his true nature began to be made manifest, they began to take notes.

And they've been adding to that file ever since. They watched as he healed a man born blind, flagrantly violating highly sacred Sabbath laws in the process.

They caught wind of his conversation with a Samaritan woman--talking with her freely, in plain view, in the middle of the day. Flaunting the purity codes that keep men and women separate, that keep Jews and Samaritans, the clean and the unclean, separate.

With every such episode, they have continued to take notes, to compile evidence, to build their case against this man.

Now he mounts a donkey, as the prophet foretold, and comes riding brazenly into the capital.

Clearly he believes he is the Messiah. The people appear to believe it too, waving their palm branches and shouting their "Hosanna's!"

Which can only mean one thing. This conflict has reached its crescendo. This man must die.

This central conflict, this clash of kingdoms and empires, would have been even clearer to first century readers.

These details are lost on most of us modern readers. But biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Crossan have filled in some of details for us:

*Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year... One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession.*

*From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers came from the peasant class... On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor . . . entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus's procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire... (Borg and Crossan, *The First Week*, Day One.)*

And that is why we read these stories and tell these stories again and again. Not just because they shape us. We read them and tell them because they are true.

They were true then. And they are still true in our time. Yesterday some 500,000 young people -- along with thousands of adult supporters -- processed into our nation's capital, and into state capitals and town squares all across the country.

Admittedly they did not come riding in on a donkey. Instead they did come rolling into town in church buses and family minivans and school caravans. They came on airplanes and passenger trains.

They came equipped not with weapons but with signs. The leaders of this enormous movement came to challenge our country's political elite -- not with swords or spears but with their words.

They came from Parkland, Florida where 17 of their peers were gunned down on Valentine's Day.

They came from Columbine, Colorado, and Aurora, Colorado. They came from Newtown, Connecticut and Orlando, Florida, and Charleston, SC and Las Vegas, NV. They came from all across the country.

The came to protest not with violence or force, but with their presence, and with the power of their story.

“Welcome to the revolution,” said Cameron Kasky, a student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. “Since this movement began, people have asked me, do you think any change is going to come from this? Look around. We are the change.”

The world took notice. “The kids have come to save us,” wrote Dana Milbank, an opinion writer for the Washington Post.

This huge gathering was reminiscent for me of this day when Jesus rolled peacefully into Jerusalem to announce the good news that a new kingdom had arrived, and to implement his vision of this realm: one based on love and peace, where it was possible for men to treat women as equals, where there were no such things as clean and unclean people, or outsiders or strangers or even enemies. Just people, who deserve to be love for who they are: precious children of the creator God.

These students came to announce a new vision for the United States. One where it’s possible to go to school, or to the movies, or to a nightclub or to church, and know that you will not be killed in a hail of bullets fired from a military-grade assault weapon.

And as they rolled into the capital, we shouted with them and cheered for them.

Some of us marched with them and waved signs to show our support for them, and our solidarity with them.

For we share their vision. We agree that this country needs to be saved from the chokehold of special interests, and we are happy that these kids are willing to lead the effort necessary to save it, to save us.

The good news is that I believe the story of what happened yesterday will be told again and again. I also believe that the power of this story has the potential to change our very future as a people, to change the neuroanatomy of public policy in this country.

But I am also mindful of what happened on that first Palm Sunday. And that as was the case then, what happened yesterday is surely not the end of the story.

Which is why I had planned to close this sermon with a cautionary reminder that the tide can turn quickly.

That the people who welcomed Jesus and shouted their hosannas are the same people who turned on him, the same people who just days later gave themselves over to their darker sides, to their shadow selves, and shouted for him to be crucified.

It was meant to be a cautionary word, a pastoral reminder that this potential to give ourselves over to our shadow side resides in all of us, and to guard against giving in ourselves over to it.

But I'm not going to do that this morning because that turn has already happened. The cries of crucify have already been issued.

Commentators for TV networks I will not bother to mention have already begun to mock the efforts of these kids to bring about the changes they wish to see and to save the soul of this country.

"No one would know your names" said one, if a gunman hadn't stormed into their school and killed three staff members and 14 students.

"These kids are acting like they are bulletproof," said another.

The shouts of crucify have already gone up, so I'm not going to make that move today.

Instead, as Good Friday approaches, I'm going to invite us to share in the grief these kids feel at the death of their classmates and friends and teachers and coaches. And to let ourselves feel our own grief, for the friends we've lost to violence or to illness. And to the hopes it feels like we have lost for ourselves or our country.

And then, one week from today, I am going to suggest that we join our story to theirs.

That we harness the power of our faith, the enormous power of the great Easter story, not just to save this country but to help bring about the world Jesus imagined, where love is the law that binds us together, and where God's shalom -- God's justice and peace -- are realized here on earth as they are in heaven. Amen.