

Following the Way

Today is about the midpoint of the Lenten journey as the 6th Sunday of the period marks that day with the split personality—called Palm Passion Sunday on the church calendar. When I was growing up, the small rural Presbyterian Church which I attended was not one which had many very formal worship rituals or observances. It was in fact more puritanical in appearance—no paraments, banners, no candles and little in the way of ornamentation. Neither Advent nor Lent was recognized as seasons within worship. In fact, we did not single out many days as being special, including Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, or Good Friday, or really even the entire journey of Holy Week. We only singled out Palm Sunday and Easter as being very special and worthy of special services with the focus on the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the triumph found in the empty tomb on that Sunday morning. We totally avoided the not so comfortable contemplation of the way of the cross—of the betrayal and the pain and suffering of Jesus which gave those women a reason to go to the tomb early on that morning. Because the Lenten season in general and Holy Week in particular did not fit into the way that we thought about things, we did not include them in our way of worship. Somehow, in this community, these things were associated the Catholic faith with a big “C” meaning Roman Catholic and not with Christian observances so they were treated with suspension. In other words...it wasn't our way of doing things because it hadn't been the way those who came to the area and founded the community in the 1700's worshiped. It didn't fit into the way it we viewed things...so it couldn't offer us any insight or anything useful and in fact should be viewed with suspicion...because of course the way that we did things was...let me see...how was the way the way we did things would have been described...of course...the right way, right? Isn't that what it is always called? I mean when a new idea is presented, when a new way is encountered...what is almost universally the response of those encountering it for the first time say...it is viewed with suspicion...and why? Because what has always been done is...what? The right way or perhaps, it is just termed the better way because...hasn't it always worked? When reading the passage from Isaiah 55 this week about God's invitation for humanity to come to the feast which the Lord provides so abundantly for us which is lifted so strongly in the first portions of the text, it was the latter portion of the text that kept repeating in my mind like the refrain from of one of those jingles from commercials that you just can't get out of your mind once you have heard them. They can be so irritating, but they just keep echoing. The words “For my thoughts are not your thoughts; nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.” That phrase just kept echoing. How do we understand that bit of truth about the Lord's ways? There are two sections. The “your way” of this verse is actually speaking of humanity's way...our way...the way that we look at things...the way that we do things...the way that we look at the world and at each other...that bit of thinking that we have that determines how we even think about what our scriptures reveal to us about God's way. It seemed that everywhere I looked this week this idea of a “way” kept intruding. My daughter has asked me to keep my grandchildren over the first weekend in April while she and Kevin attend the NCAA Final Four basketball tournament in Minneapolis. She is leaving me detailed instructions—her way for caring for them, assuming my way might not be the same as her way. And of course, my way over the week end might create a problem. My mother was a great fan of Frank Sinatra and one of his notable and often featured songs was titled “I did it my way.” This was a very

popular song which quite clearly shouts out a very human claim of self determination and pride, of total independence and self-reliance on doing it my way. In contrast to that, there is a Lenten Bible study by Adam Hamilton called "The Way" featured this time of the year. This study is based on the way in which Jesus traveled throughout the Palestinian region of Galilee teaching and healing during his life on earth. That title is based on the history that those earliest followers of Jesus did not call themselves Christians, but followers of the Way. They gathered his teachings into something called the Didache. That was a book of instructions for ways to live together in a caring community. If we set the ways called for in Hamilton's study and the Didache against those lauded in Frank Sinatra's song we can easily discern that there is a gulf between the two—"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord." I read a prayer by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in which he stated, "I do not understand your ways." And considering the times and place in which Bonhoeffer lived and his experience of Nazi rule in his homeland; that seems like a profound statement of a profound truth about humanity and God whom he believed to be sovereign. How could what we believe of God's ways be reconciled to those events he witnessed? How do we reconcile God's ways to the events—the mass shootings and hatred of our times? In fact, that feeling Bonhoeffer expressed is perhaps why this verse from Isaiah is so very familiar to us. It is also why the question brought before Jesus makes us so uncomfortable. We often pull out this Isaiah verse to explain the unexplainable. However, this represents a use of the verse taken out of context. Because, often we are using the verse as a way of throwing up our hands metaphorically when trying to understand some catastrophe or calamity in our lives or on the news. We, often very easily, give this as a pat answer—"you know the Lord's ways are not ours"—as if somehow the disaster is the Lord's judgment and we hold no responsibility for what has happened. This is so much easier a response than facing ourselves in the mirror and realizing that often the roots of these events which distress us lie in our own ways...our own ways of doing it "my way" without looking at the consequences. Is what has happened really the Lord's doing? Is whatever has happened really what we believe is God's will for us or is it the result of our going our own way in the way we treat one another? Have they happened in some cases because we have allowed fear and hatred to grow instead of speaking up for acceptance and seeking to learn to know the "other"? Have they happened because we have allowed hopelessness and despair to flourish instead of seeking ways to create equality and justice? Especially do we attribute these distressing events as being the Lord's righteous judgment on the "other" whom we don't know or understand so that we don't have to change our life styles which might have contributed to whatever tragedy has occurred...or maybe consider that that "other" is also a child of God in a way that is different from the way that we know because God's ways are different from our own. It seems to me that this Lenten season is a perfect time to reflect on this idea...what really does this passage tell us about the Lord's ways? How are the Lord's ways different from ours? Isaiah 55:9 continues, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts your thoughts." That statement itself does not clarify exactly what the Lord's ways are, but it gives a hint that we are not justified in claiming the Lord's ways are likely to run parallel to ours. We do have a basis for saying that we don't understand the Lord's ways because we can only look at things and think of things through the human perspective—that is our way—and that is not the Lord's way. God is creator. We are the created. But after all of this what we have to accept is that it is the Lord's way which is the

better way. And if we want to truly look at what is the Lord's way, we must go back to the first portion of Isaiah 55. It begins with a Hebrew word which is an attention getter and is often translated as come. "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear and come to me; listen so that you may live." God's invitation tells us all that we need to know about God's ways. God's ways are and have always been rooted in God's love for us. God's desire to draw us into a relationship of love and caring where all are nourished and have an abundant life. God always seeks and desires that relationship, desiring to grant mercy and abundantly pardon. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.