

Sermon for Sunday, April 13, 2014 Palm Sunday Matthew 21:1-11 "Reading Signs"

Doug and I went to the movies on Friday night and saw "The Grand Budapest Hotel." It's a great movie, although it's not for kids by any stretch of the imagination.

This was a movie made by the wonderfully strange Wes Anderson. From the very first moment of the movie, it was clearly Wes Anderson, he who made "The Royal Tenenbaums," "The Fantastic Mr Fox," and "Moonrise Kingdom." The signs were all there: quirky music, odd visual images, famous actors playing very unconventional characters.

We love these signs – they're sort of a short-hand way of telling us what to expect. And movies are notorious for these. Oftentimes, the signs for movies are musical. The thump-thump thump-thump that lets us know that the great white shark is coming in "Jaws." The pentatonic sequence from "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." The theme from the Godfather...

Other signs might be visual. Wes Anderson movies usually end with a slo-motion sequence, taking us to a place of calm and meditation. Rain, shadows, darkness? Film noir. A field of flowers? A romance. A jumble of tumbleweed? A cowboy movie of some sort.

Costumes, setting, all contribute to our expectations of what the movie will be about. And motifs like this date all the way back to ancient stories that were transmitted orally, not written down.

We like to have clues of what will happen next...

...and in today's reading of the passion of Jesus Christ, signs abound. Ironic signs, to be sure, but signs.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem. He's just performed a miracle – the raising of Lazarus from the dead. He's on a roll – everyone is talking about how amazing he is. He heals! He preaches! He teaches! All the people are amazed by him, and now he is coming to Jerusalem, to the great Temple. And he must make a grand entrance, so he sends the disciples ahead to fetch him an animal to ride in on, actually two – a donkey and a colt. I sometimes wonder whether he sort of stood up with the two animals, with one foot on each, like a trick rider in the circus, or whether he rode for a while on the donkey, then switched over to the colt. But notice how this is the first time he ever seems to travel anyplace other than by foot...and there's the sign that something different is happening, something that doesn't really fit into who Jesus is. And anytime that happens, something that doesn't fit, it makes us uncomfortable. We know something bad may be happening here.

Then he rides into Jerusalem, and everybody's yelling and screaming with joy, waving branches of trees around, and putting them on the ground so Jesus doesn't even have to put a foot on the dusty ground. But didn't Jesus spend the past three years walking from place to place, nobody laying out a carpet of branches to protect his delicate feet? And sometimes people were mean to him, and sometimes those pesky Pharisees were there trying to trick him with weird legalistic questions. But now Jesus is riding into town and everyone is saying he is the prophet, the anointed one, the one coming in the name of the Lord. Despite the fact that Jesus has sidestepped that kind of naming throughout his ministry. Despite the fact that he often said, "Don't tell anyone about what we are doing." But now he seems to accept the acclamations of the crowd.

Another sign, the shouts and the branches, just like the riding into town. So unlike the itinerant rabbi going from town to town by foot, with a few disciples. It's a sign, a signal that something bad is happening.

Because in every dramatic movie we see, when the protagonist does something out of character, when he is most applauded, we know that something bad is going to happen. He will be destroyed after he has been uplifted. Like every political candidate we admire, until we learn of their flaws. Like every teen musical star who is viewed as pure and unspoiled, until their circumstances change as they age, and they become the troubled adults. Those are motifs we see over and over again.

And then there's Jesus. Not a political star, not a rock star. Something very different, the very son of God, the one with the power to change the world...and he knows the signs as well as anyone. He knows this change – the crowd's applause, the branches, the ride – is a sign that the end is near, because he knows they will turn on him, just as we turn on our political heroes and our favorite performers. He sees what awaits him, because he can read the signs, the motifs, as well as a famous movie critic or political pundit.

It will end. It will end badly. We have heard the horror of it in the passion story.

But there is another sign, not as obvious as the palms and shouts. It is not a part of the first reading from the Gospel of Matthew, that one we read outside, the story of the palms.

No, it is near the end of the story of the Passion, which we just read, the darkest and most frightening story in the Bible, at the point when we are most exhausted by the listing of horror after horror that we are no longer really paying attention.

Jesus has died, at last. And at the moment of his death, the curtain of the temple is torn in two, and an earthquake shakes the ground so violently that even the dead are shaken out of their tombs.

A sign that something irreparable has been broken. Frightening to those who were a part of it, certainly. But also a mark of reordering, of violent change.

As if we didn't already know it, those of us who have heard Jesus' story. That which was solid has been broken, so that something new can be constructed of the remnants. That which seemed permanent has been shown to be vulnerable.

And yet, in that vulnerability is the possibility of something new and better. Jesus' body is broken, like the trampled palm branches underneath the feet of the crowds. But out of that body, there is something reborn, not made the same way as the old way, but something stronger, more resilient, purer through the suffering.

Signs are all around us, giving us clues and cues of what is happening. Palms, songs of praise, wails of death and destruction. But after the signs, another set of signs: children, new flowers, sprouting fruit trees. A new beginning will be coming soon. Wait and watch for the signs. There are there, if you only choose to see them.

Amen.