

19 April 2020

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE CURTAIN -Let's See!

### John 20:19-31

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Our Eastertide sermon series, "WHAT'S BEHIND THE CURTAIN" continues this week with the topic of "Let's See!"

The theme was inspired by a viewing early in the Coronavirus lockdown of the "Wizard of Oz." It's always been one of my favorite movies, ever since it first was screened on TV in 1956.

The movie is one of the finest movies ever made. But it was a hand-me-down story. The screenplay was based on the children's book "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz," by L. Frank Baum, with illustrations by W. W. Denslow, published by George M. Hill of Chicago. The first edition printed 10,000 copies, which quickly sold out. By the time the book entered the public domain (1956) millions of copies had been sold.

By 1902, the book had been translated into a Broadway Musical. And Metro Goodwin Mayer spent almost \$3 million in 1939 to bring the story to the screen. The movie was nominated for six Academy Awards, but was beat out for "Best Picture" by "Gone With The Wind," by the same director. "Wizard of Oz" did win "Best Original Song" and "Best Score."

The movie made no money in its first release in 1939, but did begin to earn money in its second release in 1949, and even more in its third release in 1955.

In 1956, CBS paid out \$225,000 for the TV rights for the movie, and it debuted on television in November of that year. It was the first time any TV show had lasted a full two hours, and the difference between the movie's length (102 minutes) and the full two hours was made up by a celebrity introduction, commercials, and a celebrity closing.

From its 1956 TV debut until rights were acquired by NBC in 1968, CBS's broadcast was one of its only color telecasts in any year. The issue was the NBC/RCA dominance in color TV sales (as much as 95% of the market in 1960) and color programming for TV. It seems kind of wrong that such a beautiful thing could be rife with commercial and financial wrangling, but that was what was going on. "Behind the curtain."

My favorite scene in the Wizard of Oz is when Dorothy's little dog Toto goes over to the curtain in the "Wizard's" chamber and Toto pulls open the curtain.

So what does a movie have to do with today's Gospel? Just as what was going on "behind the curtain" for "Wizard of Oz" was commercial and financial shenanigans not appropriate to the movie, so by the time of Jesus, what was going on in the Temple in Jerusalem, the place where the entire religious life of the Jewish people centered, had become full of commercial and financial enterprise. It is brought to the forefront of Jesus' story when he cast out the money changers and buyers and sellers from the Temple, declaring, "'It is written,' he said to them, 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'" (Matthew 21:13)

What was Jesus' issue? The Jerusalem Temple was the center of the priestly exercise of the most critical rite in the Hebrew Faith, the forgiveness, or atonement, of the people's sin. And commercial activity (buying and selling sacrificial animals) and financial activity (changing profane Greek and Roman money into sacred Temple money) we're keeping ordinary people from the saving mercy of God.

In our Gospel for this day, Jesus bypasses the whole Temple cultic worship (He had already said the Temple wasn't going to be there - Matthew 24:2) by handing down the priesthood to the disciples.

It's Resurrection night. The disciples are in an upper room, with doors and windows locked for fear of the Jewish authorities. Suddenly, Jesus is there in the flesh. He greets them, "Peace be with you." He says, "Receive a Holy Spirit." Then he breathes on them and says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you don't, they aren't." Jesus has just handed down the priesthood, the power to mediate the forgiveness of sins.

Where had the priesthood come from. We read in Genesis 14 that Abram received it at the blessing hands of the priest of God at Salem (today's Jerusalem), Melchizedek. Abram handed it down to Isaac, and then to Jacob, and through the twelve sons to all of Israel. After the Exodus, God orders Moses (Exodus 29) to anoint his brother Aaron as high priest, and then God prescribes the rituals that will atone for (mediate the forgiveness of) sins. The Tabernacle, and later the Temple, become the center of that cultic ritual of forgiveness, and the high priest, descended from Aaron, the person doing the things to ensure God's forgiveness.

Leviticus 4 describes the high priest's role no less than four times, "Thus the priest shall make atonement on your behalf for the sin that you have committed, and you shall be forgiven."

So how did Jesus have the right to hand down this role to the disciples? Hebrews 4 states, “. . . since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. 16 Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” And in Hebrews 5 we read, “So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”; 6 as he says also in another place, ‘You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.’”

Jesus was the mediator of forgiveness, and he handed it down to the disciples. But they weren’t all there.

One of the absent disciples was Thomas. When the others told him Jesus had been there, Thomas said he wouldn’t believe it, “Not until I put my hands in his side and touch his hands.” Thomas wanted an original and unique, personal-just-for-him experience of Jesus. And so, eight days later, Jesus was there again, and this time Thomas was, too.

Jesus said, “Thomas, put your hands in my hands. Touch my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas accepted what Jesus was handing him and said, “My Lord . . .”

There are those who think the handing down of the priesthood stopped with the institutional church. The Roman Catholic Church believes that there is no salvation outside of the priestly administration of the Sacraments. This held until the time of Martin Luther. He wrote (in his 1520 “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation”), quoting I Peter 2, vs 9, “You are a royal priesthood and a priestly kingdom,” and Revelation 5, vs 10, “Through your blood you have made us into priests and kings.” We United Methodist Christians believe that all believers are ministers, and some to more specialized ministries (ie. Word, Sacrament, and Order).

Nonetheless, ours is a hand-me-down Faith, from the Patriarchs, through the Kingdom, through Jesus, the Apostles, to us, all believers.

(from Christian History Today 14 April 2020) In December 1941 Mitsuo Fuchida led the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. When he sent up a green flare, the bombers accompanying him knew it was the moment to attack. When his plane radioed “Tora, Tora, Tora,” the Japanese knew the air attack had achieved complete surprise. For the duration of the war and for years afterward, he considered the Pearl Harbor attack the most thrilling exploit of his life. He tried to top his military success throughout the rest of World War II in attacking Ceylon and Australia. He also fought in the Solomon Islands and at the Battle of Midway. When it became apparent Japan would lose the war, he advocated fighting to the last man.

Nine years after Pearl Harbor, however, newspaper headlines trumpeted, “Pearl Harbor Hero Converts to Christianity.”

What had happened?

When Japanese troops were disbanded, Fuchida was among them. He was dumbfounded when he learned that a war buddy had been kindly treated in American captivity. How could that be? Enemies were not

supposed to be kind to each other! During the war trials following the allied victory, an American offered Fuchida a religious pamphlet in a Tokyo train station.

Despite his Buddhist background, he took it because its title intrigued him: *I Was a Prisoner of Japan*. It was the story of Jake DeShazer whom the Japanese had cruelly mistreated as a prisoner of war. DeShazer had been filled with hatred for his captors; but by reading the Bible he had learned to love the Japanese and after the war had become an evangelist to them. His story moved Fuchida, who purchased a Bible so he could find out for himself why DeShazer was so changed.

Reading Luke's account of the Crucifixion, Fuchida was impressed when Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." He would write later, "That date, April 14, 1950, became the second 'day to remember' of my life. On that day, I became a new person. My complete view on life was changed by the intervention of the Christ I had always hated and ignored before."

Shortly afterward, he stood on a platform with Jake DeShazer, both men giving their testimonies. Fuchida went on to evangelize throughout the Orient. He wrote the story of his conversion in *From Pearl Harbor to Golgotha*. "I now work at striking the death-blow to the basic hatred which infests the human . . . . And that hatred cannot be uprooted without assistance from Jesus Christ. He is the only One Who was powerful enough to change my life and inspire it with His thoughts."

Mitsubishi Fuchida received a hand-me-down faith. We have all received a hand-me-down faith. I received my faith from my grandmother, from my pastors, from friends. They bore witness to the saving power of Jesus, the forgiveness of sins bought with His suffering and death on the cross, the hope of life beyond life for all who believe him and trust him ("Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." John 17:3).

Are you willing to receive this hand-me-down gift? Are you willing to hand-it-down to anyone who has yet to hear that "in believing they may have life in His name." Are you?