

**Palm Sunday/The Sunday of the Passion
Year A
St. Anne's Episcopal Church
Lee's Summit, Missouri**

The Passion According to Matthew

In the name of the one holy and undivided trinity, one God. AMEN.

The time was 7:51 a.m. – rush hour - on Friday, January 12th of 2007; and the place was the L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station in Washington, D.C. A young man wearing jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and a Washington Nationals baseball cap began to play the violin.

His violin case was at his feet in front of him, to catch the money that those passing by on their way to work might throw his way. He continued playing for about 45 minutes. Most of the thousand or so people who walked by him during that time barely noticed the young violinist or paused to listen to the music he was playing.

A few (twenty-seven to be exact) threw some money into the case. When he had finished playing, he had collected exactly thirty-two dollars and seventeen cents.

Now, you may have heard about this situation on the television news or read about it in the newspaper back in 2007. Because the young man playing the violin at the Metro Stop in January was Joshua Bell, the very same Joshua Bell who received the Avery Fisher Prize as the best classical musician in America.

The violin he played that day was handcrafted in 1713 by Antonio Stradivari, and Bell had bought it a few years ago for 3.5 million dollars. And, the music in the Metro Stop concert that day was composed by the masters, Bach, Schubert, you get the picture.

You see, this little experiment was rigged by *The Washington Post* and all caught on videotape. It was described as a “test of whether, in an incongruous context, ordinary people would recognize genius.” And, the result was that they couldn’t.

But, I wonder if it wasn’t also a test of how much routine can dull our appreciation of the beauty and wonder, the edginess and surprise, the incredible inspiration around us.

At one point in my life, I took the Metro in Washington to work every day. Taking my ticket out of my purse, walking through the turnstile, getting on my train while I read my newspaper, walking by the folks who were playing the violin or the saxophone or some other instrument for money (Joshua Bell isn’t the only musician playing for money around metro stations – you see them all the time), getting my blueberry muffin and cup of tea when I got off the train and heading to Capitol Hill - it was routine.

So routine that after awhile the Capitol Building which had absolutely taken my breath away the first time I saw it became, well, it became routine. I didn’t really see it any more. I didn’t see its beauty or remember all it stands for. It just became a place to go to work.

And, I’m pretty certain that if I had walked past Joshua Bell playing Bach and Schubert on a \$3.5 million violin on one of those mornings, I would have just kept walking. That’s what routine does, I think. It’s human nature.

Routine can do that with our reading of scripture, too. I have to admit it - I can hear certain words of scripture so often that I really don’t hear them anymore. They become routine. Perhaps it’s that way for you, too.

When that happens I think we can miss things that are pretty important, pretty wonderful, and pretty amazing. Just like those commuters missed Joshua Bell, and I missed the Capitol Building.

The story of Christ's passion – his crucifixion and death – can be that way, I'm afraid.

Is it possible for us – this year on Passion Sunday and during Holy Week - to hear this very familiar story in a new and fresh way? Not like we've already heard it a hundred times (which we probably have) or like we already know the ending (which we do) - but like we are listening to it for the first time. To catch its beauty and wonder, its edginess and surprise, its incredible inspiration.

It is a surprising and amazing story, and we don't want to miss it.

As one scholar has written, this is a drama that “swirls to and fro with friendships betrayed, new worlds evoked, justice denied, empire appeased, faith insulted, innocence abused.” We will hear this amazing story in several different forms this week, concluding next Sunday with the story of Jesus' resurrection.

During each of our times together during Holy Week, I want us to focus for a few moments on one of the characters in this story – Judas the betrayer, Simon Peter, Pilate the Roman governor, Mary Magdalene.

Today, I want us to consider one of the “bit players” in this Holy Week drama. She was such a minor character, in fact, that she doesn't even have a name in Matthew's telling of this story. All we know about her is that she was a “servant girl.” A girl who simply spoke the truth.

Let's go back to the scene for a moment.

Jesus is being interrogated in front of the Jewish religious elite, the council, known as the Sanhedrin. He is an innocent man, guilty of no wrong-doing, who has been falsely accused. And, the members of the Sanhedrin are trying to find witnesses who will testify to some offense Jesus had committed that would justify putting him to death and getting him out of their way.

Jesus is alone in front of this angry group, because as we heard a few minutes ago, all the disciples had deserted him and fled. Peter seemingly wants to stay a safe enough distance from Jesus to protect himself, but he isn't quite able to stay completely away. He wants to see how this all will end.

And, as he stands in the courtyard of Caiaphas' house, outside where the interrogation was taking place, our servant-girl comes up to him and makes a simple, factual statement, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean."

Now, he could have ignored her or quietly told her that she was wrong about him. But, no, Peter responded in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear him. The scripture says, he "denied it before all of them, saying, 'I do not know what you are talking about.'"

A little servant girl. A small, insignificant, powerless person. A female in a patriarchal culture. A servant. A young person. A person who should have been completely non-threatening to Peter. A person who didn't accuse Peter of anything and who couldn't have brought any consequences to bear even if she had made a serious accusation. Someone who could have easily been dismissed, ignored, turned away.

But, with one simple, truthful statement, she was able to cause Peter to deny that even knew this friend named Jesus.

The same Peter who had left his fishing nets behind when Jesus called, the same Peter who had declared Jesus to be the Messiah and who Jesus called “the Rock,” the same Peter who had seen Jesus transfigured on the mountain, the same Peter who at dinner only the night before had said, “Jesus, all the rest of these guys may desert you, but I’m here for you. I’ll never desert you.”

How could the “rock,” the foundation of the church, cave so easily?

For Peter that night, confronted by someone who was truly powerless, when the stakes at that moment were pretty low, he caved and denied his friendship with Jesus. It was actually a pretty small test and Peter failed it. He failed it miserably, even while his friend Jesus was passing an extremely difficult test just inside Caiaphas’ house.

Now, if I am honest with myself and with God, I can relate to Peter on that dark night in the courtyard. I know that I have failed a test like Peter’s many times. I have faced my own “servant-girl,” and I have caved.

My faith has gone right out the window, even when, honestly, the stakes were pretty small and the situation I’ve faced really had little power over me. I think perhaps these “servant-girls” in our lives are the most likely to cause us to cave, simply because they seem so insignificant and unimportant.

On Ash Wednesday as we began the season of Lent and prayed the Litany of Penitence, we asked God to accept our repentance for the “failure to confess the faith that is in us” – those times and

places when our faith has caved and we didn't show the world who we really are – those who have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.

This Holy Week as we walk with Jesus toward the cross, may we each recall our own true identity – who we are and whose we are. May we confess those times and places where we have not shown that identity to the world and then seek the power of the Spirit to strengthen us as we face the “servant-girls” in our lives.

This week we will hear a surprising and amazing story, and we don't want to miss it.

AMEN.