

High Heels on the South Rim

Time after Pentecost, Lectionary 14
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, July 6, 2008
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Zechariah 9:9-12; Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Click . . . click . . . click . . . click . . . click . . . click . . .

Standing on the south rim of the Grand Canyon, looking down into the immense canyon itself, my family and I didn't recognize at first what that clicking noise was. So we turned around, and there we saw a pretty young woman, mincing her way along the rim trail in a highly fashionable pair of spiky high heels. Why in the world she would be wearing high heels on that precipice a mile above the canyon floor was beyond me. Perhaps she was staying in the nearby lodge, merely checking out the scenery for a moment before retreating to one of the porch rockers at the lodge. She certainly couldn't go far like that, wobbling around in her footwear. Walking shoes and hiking boots were the order of the day. She must not have gotten the memo. Click . . . click . . . click . . . click . . .

A few days later, Randy, our 3 children and I were descending a moderately difficult trail at Zion Canyon in Utah—a trail of rather rocky ground with long drop offs, few railings separating you from those drop offs, but a fantastic view at the top. It was in the high 90's and bright sun was beating down on us. We were tired from the hike, and guzzling the last of our Gatorade on the way **down** when we passed a couple heading **up**. No water bottles or Gatorade in their hands as far as we could see. And the woman was wearing sandals of some sort. Not even sturdy Birkenstocks. Just flimsy sandals. We figured they had a long hard climb ahead of them.

It wasn't as if the National Park Service at Grand Canyon or Zion Canyon or Bryce Canyon didn't warn folks about the seriousness of hiking in the heat, elevation, and rough terrain. The Park Service made clear that, every year, folks attempted trails without proper footwear or provisions, without taking into account their physical fitness, weather conditions or time of day. The Park Service even had an ad in their guide paper with a photo of a handsome, strapping young man, lean and athletic. The ad indicated that—surprise! It would be people just like him who would get into trouble in the canyon. In other words, even those who looked like they knew what they were doing were the very ones the Park Service had to rescue . . . if it could. Over and over, the Park Service reminded tourists that the tourists were responsible for taking appropriate safety precautions. Over and over, the Park Service reminded tourists that every year people get seriously hurt or die. Because, over and over again, people failed to heed good advice.

Isn't that similar to what Jesus suggests in Matthew's Gospel today? Our Gospel lesson opens up with Jesus discussing people's response (or lack of) both to the preaching of his kinsman John the Baptist, and Jesus himself. Apparently, the people of his generation didn't listen when John the Baptist called them to repent and prepare for the arrival of God's kingdom. John the Baptist

preached to crowds in the wilderness, lashing out at the rich and famous, the unjust and hypocritical, but many folks simply didn't heed his advice to repent, didn't even bother to seek forgiveness. Okay, then you might think that maybe instead they would have liked Jesus' advice better, for Jesus' teaching and preaching seemed somehow gentler and kinder, more compassionate, but in the long run, was no less demanding of allegiance and obedience to God. Yet, Jesus says here that the people didn't much listen to him, either. They insisted on following their own path in life. Insisted on wearing high heels on the south rim of the canyon anyway.

Even those who deeply desired to follow a path of obedience to the Lord God, even those who knew God's Law—not only the 10 Commandments but every other rule down to the last jot and tittle—and then strove to obey with lives of faithfulness and uprightness, often failed. Even those who looked like they knew what they were doing failed. (Because they ultimately trusted in themselves and their own ability alone, perhaps?) Like those strapping, healthy young men who got in trouble hiking down into the Grand Canyon, there is Paul in our second lesson, writing to the Christian congregation in Rome of this strange reality he experiences. Paul knows God's righteousness; he knows what it takes to be obedient; Paul knows what it means to live according to the Law. But he sounds absolutely mystified and totally frustrated by the fact that though he **wants** to do good, the very good he wants to do, he **cannot**. And the evil he knows is evil, an evil which he hates, the wrongs he desperately wants to avoid, **he does anyway**. For a moment there in Romans, you hear such despair in Paul's voice: *Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*

But then Paul tells us there **is** someone who will rescue him: *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Jesus Christ rescues. Jesus Christ came to save. For centuries, Christians have read the words of our First Lesson, and have believed that Zechariah's prophecy about the debut of a great king was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ. In fact, this is the Old Testament lesson referred to in all four of our Gospels when they describe Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in the days just prior to his crucifixion. The Gospel lessons appointed for the Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday, at the beginning of Holy Week, state that Jesus' act of riding into Jerusalem on a donkey is fulfillment of Zechariah's prophetic words long before. For here in Zechariah is this powerful image of someone riding into the city of Jerusalem on a donkey, and hailed as the true king. Triumphant and victorious, yet humble and peace-making—total opposites, an oxymoron to say the least. Yet isn't that precisely our interpretation of that prophecy, and what we hold to be true to our faith? That Jesus Christ, fully God, yet fully man, comes to us. He comes triumphant as king of the universe, yet humble and servant-like in his ways. He comes victorious in waging war against the sin and death in our lives, yet commanding a kingdom that stretches from sea to sea where peace will reign and implements of war will no longer be necessary. Who will rescue us from the precipice we teeter on so often, or the canyons in which we find ourselves lost, out of breath, beyond our abilities? Zechariah hints at, and Paul gives the answer to that question: *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Though the prophet Zechariah, who was speaking here to Israelites chastened by years of exile in Babylon, might not have envisioned the fullness of this king as being God himself, you and I

can. And do. Therefore we, too, can respond by rejoicing like all those in Zion. And we can share this joy with others. Let's consider how.

We just celebrated the Fourth of July, our nation's Independence Day, on Friday. I find it interesting to reflect on this king Zechariah prophesied, as well as Jesus' words at the end of our Gospel lesson this morning—words to people willing to hang around long enough and listen to him—words about bearing his yoke. A fascinating concept, this idea of taking on a yoke, particularly from a king. Don't know that we Americans in the United States fancy the notion of being yoked. Our struggle in 1776 and the years surrounding it marked a time when we strove to break free from the burdensome yoke of the British Empire and its colonization process; when we thumbed our nose at King George III; when we rebelled against taxes levied with no say in the matter of our own governance. Our very identity is a fabric woven with our refusal to bear a yoke laid on us by England or any other nation, for that matter.

But the funny thing is that, as mightily as we have tried these 232 years to keep from bearing a yoke of servitude, we end up bearing great burdens anyway. Both as a nation and as individual citizens of it. There's our ever-increasing dependence on oil, impacting both environmental and foreign policies as well as personal pocketbook. There's our willingness to take on a mountain of debt in order to purchase the biggest, best, newest wave of things. There's our indifference to those living on the edge, many only one paycheck from the precipice, who lack the basics in food, shelter, medical care, and because we wear the yoke of indifference, they simply fall through the cracks in the system and no one notices. There's our constant preoccupation with ourselves, our wants, our pet peeves, our desires, our disappointments. Some yokes we take on, huh? So much for independence and freedom.

Well, Jesus Christ invites us to take on **his** yoke, and it is markedly different from any yoke we've ever had to bear by force or choice. He wants us to let go of all the yokes we have taken up, and instead take up his. A yoke under which we can truly **rest**. A yoke he declares is **easy**. Let's try to understand these particular words. Apparently, the resting we are to do bearing his yoke isn't a rest that consists of doing nothing. Jesus isn't saying, "Go ahead, take the day off!" Bearing his yoke provides **rest** for us in that, under his rule as our king, we have been given a brand new, deep, abiding relationship with God. That kind of existence, where we are beloved creatures of the creator makes for a real rest, and an end to the weary work we've always insisted on doing to get ahead, to succeed, to win whatever burdensome race we thought we had to enter. Instead, we are welcomed to live the very vision of life **God** desires for us, using our energies in ways God purposes. And when our energies are used in those kinds of ways—life-giving, compassionate, serving ways—a person might get tired, but not weary, and that tiredness will be very satisfying. In a similar vein, Jesus declares his yoke **easy**. This doesn't mean easy as in "not strenuous," like the descriptions of the hiking trails at the canyons my family and I visited—they were termed easy, moderate or strenuous, and you needed to know the difference. No, the word used here for "easy" is better understood as meaning "being superior for a particular purpose" or "being useful" or "being good" or "being suitable." The yoke our Lord Jesus would have us take on our shoulders is a good one, one intended for a good purpose. And it is a yoke that our Lord Jesus knows is best suited for us, it's designed to fit us who are his followers, his disciples, his apprentices.

Jesus Christ wants us to learn from him all his ways, and take them on ourselves. He's telling us to ditch the high heels on the south rim. He's inviting us to put on sturdy shoes to walk his path in this world—a path of peace-making and generosity and righteous living, of reconciliation and loving care for others. As citizens of this nation, we best exemplify the best of this nation when we heed Jesus' advice, rejoice in his kingship over our lives, and then wear his gentle yoke in our daily words and deeds. *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.* AMEN.

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