

**University Presbyterian Church
San Antonio, Texas
Elizabeth McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“I Am the Way”
John 14: 1-6a and John 12: 9-12
March 16, 2008
Palm Sunday**

The “I Am” sayings which are found in the Gospel of John have been the biblical texts which have accompanied our Lenten journey this year: I Am the Light of the World; I Am the Gate; I Am the Good Shepherd; I Am the Resurrection and the Life; I Am the Vine; I Am the Way (today); I Am the Bread of Life (Maundy Thursday).

To review briefly, “I AM” isn’t just “I am,” a benign and rather non-descriptive subject and verb. “I Am” is the very name of God, you may remember from the Exodus passage which was read on Ash Wednesday. Exodus 3 tells us that “I Am” is the name by which God introduced God’s very own personal self to Moses while simultaneously knocking Moses’ sandals off in front of a burning bush. When the “I Am” thread is picked up and pulled from the Old Testament into the New Testament, it indicates an organic unity: Jesus is the One in whom the very being of God dwells.

Another distinctive characteristic of the “I Am” sayings is that they identify God-ness, if you will, in that which was very ordinary: bread, light, a shepherd, a gate to a sheepfold, a vine. And...a way.

“The way” (a synonym for “the road”) was as common an image in the first century Middle East as bread, as light, as shepherd, as vine. The Middle East was in those days, as it is today, a rich stew of religions and cultures. Many of them held this concept of “the way,” although surely there were differences in what “the way” came to mean among different religions and cultures. The metaphor of “the way” as signifying life with God, journeying on a road with God, if you will, was present in a powerful way in Judaism (although there were differences in how the concept was understood even in Judaism) and thus available to be adopted in a similarly powerful way by the early Christian community. (1)

We move now to the Palm Sunday story as told in the Fourth Gospel. It is an account of Jesus’ travel along the road, that is, “the way” into Jerusalem. As I have mentioned before, we must always keep in mind when reading references to “the Jews” and “the Pharisees” in the Johannine corpus that what is being reflected is the tension that existed as the fledging Christian community pulled away from the synagogue and began to form its own particular identity. We must take care in our reading that the tension not serve as grounds for our judging one religion as superior to another in the 21st century.

Jesus’ so-called triumphal entry into Jerusalem is recounted in all four gospels. All four versions share a common core: Jesus rides a donkey during the entry and is greeted by a crowd. Beyond this common core, however, there are differences between the narratives. For one thing, the version we have read today is considerably briefer; the others go to some length to inform readers about how much

preparation it took to find the donkey. For another thing, this version is the only one which specifies that the branches were *palm* branches. (2)

There is something else in the Fourth Evangelist's telling of the story which is unique. In John's version, we read, "Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written, "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" This is a quotation from the Old Testament book of Zechariah, chapter 9, verse 9. When one reads it from Zechariah, however, the verse reads: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!" For "rejoice greatly" the gospel writer substitutes a different line; for "rejoice greatly" he substitutes, "do not be afraid."

I find this substitution not only interesting, but, I have a hunch, intentional on the part of the gospel writer and enormously important for readers. For, you see, following the way of Jesus, whether it means riding a donkey on the road that leads to death on a cross, as it did for Jesus, or whether it means living faithfully amid all the forces that conspire to pull us off the road of loving God and neighbor in our own day and time, can be a scary proposition. It can make us fearful, and fear can be one of the most, if not *the* most, powerful force in veering us away from God. What the writer means to assert when he substitutes "do not be afraid" for "rejoice greatly" is a core theological conviction that a disciple is someone who acknowledges that fear is real, but lives with courage and freedom as if it is not. This is what we will experience Jesus doing during his Holy Week journey, and it is what we ourselves are called to do.

For most of the remainder of the sermon, I will tell you about someone whose story I heard on NPR's "Day to Day" who seems intentionally to have crafted a life which acknowledges that fear is real, but lives with courage and freedom as if it is not. Madeleine Brand's report begins: "On Saturdays at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center here in Los Angeles, the elevators stop at every floor so that observant Jewish patients don't have to push the buttons on the Sabbath. The hospital helps devout patients of all faiths, even Jehovah's Witnesses who reject certain treatments. That's where Dr. Michael Lill comes in. He's a blood cancer specialist who treats Jehovah's Witnesses despite [the fact that the religion forbids any medical treatment which uses blood or blood products.]"

The reporter accompanies Michael Lill as he makes his rounds. One of the patients he sees is Ruth Medina, a 25-year-old Jehovah's Witness who is at Cedars-Sinai for a stem cell transplant. Commenting on her refusal to receive the blood transfusions which are typically given to boost patient's strength and help them to survive the bone marrow transplants which are used to treat Hodgkin's lymphoma, Ruth Medina says, "For me it's the sanctity of blood. Blood is the life of the person."

Michael Lill acknowledges that many of his physician colleagues think that he is slightly crazy to be treating Ruth Medina and other bone marrow transplant patients the way that he does, and they are more than happy to refer their Jehovah's Witness patients to him. But Dr. Lill treats them, first, because he has examined the statistics and found that most patients didn't really need them, so he decided to conserve patient's blood by not doing as many tests which require the drawing of blood in order to make the need for transfusion even less likely. And second, he treats them because he says, "in my capacity as a healer, I am not a technician. We are supposed to be treating the whole human being. And that involves an understanding of their spiritual aspects as well as the mechanical, technical aspects of deciding what dose of chemotherapy I give for what particular indication... Individuals get the right to make their own choices, even if they're bad choices."

There is something else about Michael Lill. A few months ago, he himself was diagnosed with cancer, cancer of the appendix. Cancer of the appendix is rare. Not a lot is known about it. In the best

case, after surgery and chemotherapy, Lill says he's looking at a nearly 90% chance of survival. But just talking chances, he says has been sad for everyone: "My daughter, before—just before she went to bed, sort of burst into tears, so I had to—she's almost 17 now so she doesn't do this very often. So I had to hold her and that was really one of the more difficult moments, was holding her while she wept for about 20 minutes. And putting her to bed and then [going outside and weeping] for myself for about half an hour. [Talking with his son and daughter about all this] hasn't changed their behavior all that much, but I think that—it's not like they suddenly start tidying up their bedroom—but I think that it's demystified for them and therefore also removed a lot of the emotional power of the unknown and the danger of everything when you don't know what's going on. So I think that's been a very helpful thing for myself. And I think it's probably something that people could do more often than they do." (3)

Michael Lill's story is, to me, a story of someone who acknowledges that fear is real, but lives with courage and freedom as if it were not...the very epitome, to me, of following the way of Jesus. I find his story to be a compelling narrative, for while the details of the way that I am called to walk, the way that you are called to walk, the way that he is called to walk, differ, he and we are enough alike in the fears that we face, that his ability to live with courage and freedom in the face of his fears, breathes a bit of courage into me and, I trust, in you.

Michael Lill's story is a compelling, inspiring story, but I almost didn't use it, and here is why. At the beginning of the radio news story on those who refuse a particular medical treatment on religious grounds, the reporter asked Michael Lill about his own religious faith. Listeners learn at the outset that Michael Lill is not Christian. He is not Jewish. He is not Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu. He is, in his own words, "on the atheist side of the agnostic fence." (4)

But then it occurred to me of how it was that when Jesus was here on earth in the flesh he was only able to look into the eyes of one person at a time; he was only able to heal one person at a time; he was only able to travel one road into one city in one region of the world. But then he ascended to his Father and came back as Holy Spirit, we affirm as Christians, and that Holy Spirit comes into our lives and in the world, the *kosmos*, as those Pharisees acknowledged in spite of themselves when they said, "Look, the whole world, the whole *kosmos*, has gone after him."

And I was reminded that the way of God and of God's Son Jesus and of the Holy Spirit is more mysterious and loving and empowering and freeing and healing that we can ever imagine, and somehow the story of Michael Lill seemed to fit perfectly in a sermon entitled "I Am the Way."

1. Gail R. O'Day, "John," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 742.
2. *Ibid.*, 706.
3. "Inside Health Care: Blood-Free Transplants for Jehovah's Witnesses," *Day to Day*, National Public Radio, February 29, 2008.
4. *Ibid.*