



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

Hero's Journey 1: Pattern and Particular

Sermon for Palm Sunday, April 12, 2017

Readings: Matthew 21:1-11; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:14- 27:66

Sermon text: Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name. Phil. 2:7

This year for Holy Week I plan to preach on the theme of the hero's journey, as traveled by Jesus of course, but also as an archetype to understand the soul's journey.

Sounds like a bad idea, I know, but bear with me. Let me begin by quoting the man whose 1949 book *A Hero With a Thousand Faces* launched a thousand screenplays, Joseph Campbell. Here is his thumbnail sketch of the hero's journey:

“A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”¹

If we try to apply this to Jesus we have an immediate problem. The initial direction is reversed. The Son of God ventured forth from a region of supernatural wonder, heaven, to earth, the world of common day. He encountered the definitely not fabulous forces of ignorance and sin, and was killed. He continued his journey down, even to hell. But on the third day he came back from the dead with a great boon: eternal life. Then he ascended to heaven. From there he sent the Holy Spirit to continue the work of reconciling heaven and earth (salvation).

Instead of taking on an heroic identity, Jesus began by shedding his divine identity. As Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:6-11) makes clear, the Savior's journey began with an emptying of self:

¹ Campbell, Joseph (1949). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 23.

Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. But within this larger arc of descent (self-emptying), heroic salvation (through self-sacrifice) and then ascent and glorification, there are times that conform more closely to Campbell's picture. Jesus left his ordinary world and work in Nazareth, became a disciple of John the Baptist, endured supernatural trials in the wilderness and then began his messianic ministry, which included encounters with demonic forces, miraculous healings and feedings, and prophetic teaching. This aroused opposition as well as followers, and the tension came to head during Holy Week.

Holy Week was a condensed crucible of his hero's journey. Today, Palm Sunday, we remember his triumphal entrance into Jerusalem, acclaimed by the people as the promised Messiah. From Monday through Thursday Jesus taught in the Temple courtyard, then during the Passover seder, the last Supper, he prophetically washed the feet of his disciples and shared bread and wine with them. We will remember and reenact these events. That evening his followers betrayed and abandoned him and Jesus was arrested. On Friday we remember his trial, crucifixion and death. He was buried and descended to the dead where he opened the gates of hell and released the captives of Satan. Jesus rose from the dead on the third day with the boon for all humanity: eternal life. On Holy Saturday night, during the Easter Vigil, we tell the old stories of creation, fall, redemption by candlelight and celebrate the return of the hero. On Easter Sunday morning we sing alleluia.

In each of these services I will speak in more depth and detail as to what is signified spiritually by these events and how they can be applied to our lives. For now let me just point out one or two things to reflect on as you go through the week.

1. **Christ, the Pattern of God:** When we say Jesus is the incarnate Word of God, we are translating the Greek word *Logos* as Word. But *Logos* does not mean simply word (there's another Greek word for words in a sentence); it means meaning as such—we get the word logic from *logos*. Or to put it another way, *logos* means *pattern*. The way the universe is patterned is through the *Logos* (through him all things were made). It is the pattern we find when science discovers what are sometimes referred to as laws of nature (in reality patterns and explanations of cause and effect). It is also the pattern we find on our minds and hearts. The pattern we find in our lives. Sometimes and somehow this pattern that God has made is disrupted. We talk about a good creation, then a fall, then, in answer to the fall, redemption, restoration, reconciliation—and new creation. Same pattern I mentioned at the beginning.

2. **Holy Week, the pattern of Salvation.** Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday: false triumph, apparent defeat, true triumph.

We see this pattern in the mystic's journey: illumination, purgation, union. Awareness of God and initial realization of God's call, awareness of difficulty and apparent abandonment by God, awareness of deeper union with God; followed by return of world (and its challenges) but inner peace and joy, and a new role to teach and heal others.

So in every life, understood as a spiritual journey, there is this pattern. Human birth is a rude awakening into the light of day, then we become used to it. The Palm Sunday parade is over; the hosannas on your birthdays grow fainter. Life can go for many years before realizing the need to be born again in spirit (it took me over over thirty years). Sometimes life can get pretty dark. But if we can trust the witness of scripture, each one of us we have a particular gift (Romans 5) and a particular call (“I have called you by name, you are mine” Isaiah 44). Insofar as it is given through the Holy Spirit it is a gift from above (Latin: *super*), a super power. Of course, it is only super if it is used for the purpose for which God gave it, for the building up of the body of Christ, for the common good of the world (Ephesians 4). If used solely for the self-interest of one person or family, well, then it is an anti-hero’s journey. The villain’s path, not the hero’s.

But even though this power and gift is from above, we know from the pattern of Christ’s life that learning and using it is going to cost you, somehow. There will be change and loss and even death. But, trusting in God—and dying if you don’t go—off you go. And though it seems in the dark night that God has abandoned you—and you join Jesus in crying from the cross “my God my God why have you forsaken me”—yet you will return in glory, united with God. This is the pattern, and the promise, the good news of Easter.

But when you do return, let us know what you have learned and what particular gifts you have brought—for we all on the journey together.

In Christ’s name. Amen.

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