

Psalm 118:19-29

Luke 19:28-40

word count: 1,754

Ashley Gilbertson is a photographer for the New York Times. He has spent time up front and close to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and he began to feel that after so many years now, people have grown all too accustomed to seeing images of fighting and destruction. He felt that a better way of showing the public how our wars have torn up families and our country was to do a photographic essay on the bedrooms these young people left behind, never to return to again. In this week’s New York Times’ Magazine, there are photographs in black and white of the bedrooms of nineteen young men and women, as they are kept today. Gilbertson aptly names his work, “The Shrine Down the Hall.”

(See the slideshow: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/03/21/magazine/20100321-soliders-bedrooms-slideshow.html>)

In almost all of these photographs, there is evidence of patriotism and love of country. Most have American flags, symbols of a particular branch of the military, and photographs of soldiers in uniform.

In my parents’ town of Yarmouth Port, Cape Cod, there was an outpouring of support for the family of a Marine Corporal named Nicholas, who was killed last July by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan. Gilbertson photographed his room as the neat, light-filled place it is, waiting ready for his return.

Stuffed toys are propped up on a floral bedspread in Private First Class Karina’s bedroom. A child’s rocker is on the floor, and ceramic figurines and family pictures line her bookcase and dresser. Nothing has changed in this room since Karina left it seven years ago when insurgents shot down her helicopter in Falluja.

A young Marine Corporal named Christopher was killed by a roadside sniper in Iraq. Posters, decals, baseball caps and the American flag cover the walls and ceiling of his bedroom in New York State. His bed looks across to a wall that has a recruiting poster, which says, “Uncle Sam Wants You.”

Each of these bedrooms reveal pieces of the personalities of these individuals each of whom made the decision to step forward into danger for a cause they perceived to be just. They left their homes in celebration, and found themselves finally, in a situation that claimed their lives, far from home and facing increasing dangers.

Each of these bedrooms also reveals the void that was left in their absence—a void and a hurt that would never fully depart from the hearts of those who loved them most.

At not too great a distance from these places where the world has lost all too many people who were beloved by someone, was a back entry into another city made dangerous by the forces of occupation—Jerusalem.

Today’s story takes us there, without leaving any of the places in this world where people place themselves in danger because they believe the cause is just and their sense of integrity demands that they step forward. This is precisely why our leaders have such a great responsibility, in asking for such sacrifices that leave so many empty rooms and broken hearts, to make sure that the cause is indeed just, else they have blood on their hands. The great tragedy is that such responsibility is taken cavalierly time and time again.

The back entrance from the east that Palm Sunday must have been a marvelous sight. The sun shining, the golden towers of the Temple sparkling in the morning light, banners flapping in the

breeze, people cheering “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” The waving of palms was a symbol of Israel’s independence. With Pontius Pilate riding into the city from the west as the symbol of political power, this was a daring venture into occupied territory.

Behind this scene, Jesus is caught in crisis. It is a day of decision, a time of choice. It goes something like this: Should he continue to confront and challenge the authorities, or should he work toward a compromise? Should he sit down and keep quiet, perhaps go into hiding, seek some safe exile, quit and go home to Nazareth, back to the carpenter shop? Or should he keep on keeping on, struggling to be faithful to what he knows through his own sense of integrity to be the greatest of just causes—the leveling of the field, the equality of each spirit of creation, the elevation of love as the highest aim—in short, the beginning of the consciousness that the realm of God on earth includes all of these things?

Can you identify with this? Have you ever been in a crisis in your own life? We all have. In seminary, I was taught that at any given time, a third of the members of any congregation could be moving into a time of some crisis, just as another third were more or less cycling out, while the other third were experiencing stability. You are not alone.

Perhaps then, some of you are trying to find your way through a crisis even now. It is noontime on Friday and the job you’ve had for all of your adult life has suddenly come to an end; the results of the X-rays and the blood tests are back and the doctor has called you in for a consultation; the cost of your education has gone up to a point where you don’t know how you will do it, or as a recent graduate, you don’t know where to find the job that will provide the resources to pay your student loans; a marriage or a partnership is falling apart; or there is a death in the family. Suddenly, it is crisis time.

The message this Palm Sunday is about the road we walk and the life we live each day. It is about riding into your future believing that the integrity in which you approach it is just and right, no matter what may lie ahead. It is about living life, fully and wholly, right now. Tomorrow will always come, but what is happening all around us is where the focus needs to be.

Watching this scene from Luke unfold is a lesson in how to handle crisis by watching Jesus hold on to what was most important as moved through the midst of crisis, through Holy Week, in this last week of his life.

Seneca, a Roman philosopher and statesman, wrote an essay entitled, “The Shortness of Life.” In it, he writes:

“The majority of mortals, complain bitterly of the spitefulness of nature, because we are born for such a brief span of life, because even this space that has been granted to us rushes by so speedily and so swiftly that all save a very few find life at an end just when they are getting ready to live.”

Seneca was concerned with integrity, values and the priorities of life. He was urging his readers to reconsider their goals, to reassess themselves, and to give the truly important things the time they deserved, but to step out in that integrity and do it now. Life is for living right now—not at some distant, saved-up-for moment.

Humanist leader Frederick Edwards, writes:

“Too many people live life on what might be called the ‘deferred payment plan.’ We begin as children who say, ‘Just wait until I grow up.’ As students, we can’t wait until we finish school and leave home in order to live as we like. When young people date, they look forward to the time when they will be married. Then they’ll be happy. When married they look ahead to owning their own home. Then they’ll be happy. When winter comes, they look to Spring, or to the day they can move to California. If they have children they say, ‘When the kids grow up and leave home, then

we'll be able to do what we want.' Of course there's still the job. So they look to retirement as the time to live."

We can live now, every day, despite the economy, illness or uncertainty. We can live, love, make a difference and hold onto our integrity no matter what is happening or not happening in the job market. We can use this time to find our meaning and test what it means to be human, even in times like these—perhaps especially in times like these when the crises around us make us confront who we are and how we will step out into an uncertain chapter.

I'm thinking of those nineteen photographs of empty bedrooms—preserved as brave young men and women left them. And while I can be angry about the unnecessary warfare and the duplicitous leadership that put them in harm's way, I can only be proud of each one of them for wanting so much to step out fully and wholly into their sense of honor that they would not stop to count the cost. It is the rest of us now who are left to grieve their loss.

Where will the journey take us beginning in this Holy Week? Jesus took it as far as he could, across the palm branches and through the temple, and to his death. What truth compels us as it did him; to burn the kinds of bridges that separate in order to lay the foundation for the pathways that link us together on our way? Don't take the trip if it is not worth taking. If we are going to take the journey of life, then take it all the way to Jerusalem and let the chips fall where they may. All or nothing. Bill Coffin used to say, "There are more important tragedies than the tragedy of death. There are no more important victories than the victory of love."

Whether to government, religious institution, or even to those who would otherwise support us; we, like Jesus, need to come into Jerusalem, into the courts of power, having said and done not the things that conform us to the world, but rather the things that transform us and consequently transform our world through the radical message of God's all-inclusive love shown to us in the gospel accounts of Jesus.

Follow Him. Ride into Jerusalem in full view. Carry your truth with you at all cost. In the end, the burned bridges will all be behind you no matter what. Take the journey right up to the gates of the temple and into the most difficult places in which you find yourselves, with the gift of God's peace and love.

Scripture for Sunday, March 28, 2010

Psalm 118:19-29

19 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. 20 This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. 21 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. 22 The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. 23 This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. 24 This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. 25 Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! 26 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. 27 The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. 28 You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. 29 O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Luke 19:28-40

28 After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. 29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, 30 saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 31 If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" just say this, "The Lord needs it." " 32 So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. 33 As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" 34 They said, "The Lord needs it." 35 Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.

36 As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. 37 As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, 38 saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" 39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." 40 He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."