

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Palm Sunday – March 29, 2015
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Isaiah 50:4-9

Matthew 21:1-11

T'ai Chi Ch'uan: The Internal Tradition by Ron Sieh

FOR REFLECTION

...I who have peered into
The meadows of his peace, sat
At the feet of his influence
And eaten disciples' bread,
Have not unlearned the old lessons,
The killing wisdom of the race.
There is no maze like the heart
That loves self, and hates that love,
And hungry, eats itself for food.

- from a psalm by Jim White, Campus Minister

The Moth and the Colt: The T'ai Chi of Being

T'ai Chi: Riding the wave before...the punch...is critical...
Before the hand comes a field, a wave of pressure that can
move the dodger ahead of it...[One must] cultivate a quality
of lightness. [One] must be sensitive like a feather in the wind
yet firmly planted in the ground...continually listening to [one's]
partner. (p.95)

From the time that I was three years old – through my teen years – my family spent many summer vacations at Red Rock Crossing in Oak Creek Canyon near Sedona, Arizona.

Every day we climbed on the rocks and played in the creek.

Every day was very much the same and yet very different.

Every day the sun rose behind the black shadow of Cathedral Rock and, in the heat of the day, we would make pools by moving rocks and we would float in inner tubes down rushing channels.

Every afternoon at 3:00 a thunder storm would drive us out of bathing suits and into town clothes; we would go into Sedona on the wet, red roads to buy groceries for dinner and collect bottle caps from soda machines.

And every evening, after the storm would drift away and the inevitable sunset would catch Cathedral Rock on fire with its own color, after dinner was cleaned up and the red-hot coals of the campfire had settled into the dirt, we would go to sleep in the deep, damp darkness – bright with stars and the sound of crickets.

Every day the world of Oak Creek would change – affected by our play – affected in spite of our play.

We would move rocks – the water would shift them again, slowly taking away the rough edges and then the smooth ones – the rain would fall, drop by drop, on each leaf and stone carrying tiny pieces of the great Cathedral into the creek, tumbling with them down and down and down, surrendering to the natural motion – resting momentarily by our feet and then tumbling on down the canyon.

We may have noticed...from year to year...the abrupt appearance of delicate changes. But, if we noticed things at all, we noticed most the changes in ourselves from year to year. We noticed how fragile and small things looked because we were older or bigger or touched by important moments that had moved us from one state of being to another, from one consciousness to a new awareness.

One summer evening, when I was still very young, my brother Todd and I found a man down the road. The man seemed old to us, not much hair, and he was seated, working on something with his hands – close to the ground and to us. The man had stretched two ropes between two trees. Between the ropes he had stretched a flat, white sheet. Behind the sheet he had placed the brightest lantern we had ever seen. We were drawn through the trees to the large expanse of white light – much like the moths were drawn – to perch on the sheet and enjoy the curiousness of light in the center of the vast darkness and the sound of crickets.

What I remember most were the sizes and colors of the night moths that hovered on that square of light – huge moths – with cool pastel colors rippling across fragile wings that moved softly and silently in the light.

I had always thought that moths were those tough little white things that ate our sweaters in the dresser drawer.

But these – these were beyond imagination – they were immense in my mind – in the light. And they flew with me into my future years and back into the past when I wandered there in search of identity and meaning and answers to the abrupt and delicate changes inside of me.

T'ai Chi: [It is sad but true that] Having an enemy gives us credentials...a reference point. I know I exist because someone else is fighting me. Narrowly defined boundaries establish their existence; space is terrifying. (p.5-6)

There have always been conflicts, wars, people who considered other people their enemy. There is a certain sense of identity that comes from being in opposition to something else. Much of my early theological identity, my ideas about God, were formed in opposition to things I was being taught in seminary. But how pale those ideas seem now in comparison to those that have shaped my consciousness since then.

Many centuries ago a man lived – a man whose sense of identity was shaped by his people, a man whose compassion and sense of justice went deep, a man whose response to oppression was personal AND communal, prophetic and poetic. He took on the identity of Israel and wrote these words from the exile of Babylon – as if Israel were he and he were Israel:

The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word him that is weary.
Morning by morning he wakens, he wakens my ear
to hear as those who are taught.
The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious,
I turned not backward.
I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those who
pulled out the beard;
I hid not my face from shame and spitting.
For the Lord helps me; therefore I have not been confounded;
therefore I have set my face like a flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together.
Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me.
Behold, the Lord God helps me; who will declare me guilty?
Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment;
the **moth** will eat them up. (Isaiah 50:4-9)

Israel had no power but the power of surrender. Within surrender was grounded-ness, an identity based not on opposition but surrender itself – surrender in relationship to

God and to self and to one another. Once liberated from physical captivity and exile, Israel knew who she was.

And her captors? The Babylonians found that the instability of power-over-others toppled them – they lost their balance and their identity, their grounded-ness, the integrity of the fabric of their being. "The moth will eat them up...." Israel said... those giant moths in the night that have no power but their beauty and their cover of darkness and their identity and their will to survive and their instinct to find the light. In her vulnerability, Israel survived...Israel was changed, but she endured.

T'ai Chi: When our partner "goes into reaction" over what we are doing or what we represent, we can steer him to his own defeat. If we meet another's movement with resistance, we disclose what we identify with – that which is vulnerable – and give our partner the route that leads to it. The priority...is to not resist the intention of our partner...[but to be elusive and to disappear.] (p.91)

Five centuries after the fall of Babylon another man lived – a man whose sense of identity was shaped by his people, a man whose compassion and sense of justice went deep, a man whose response to oppression was personal AND communal, prophetic and poetic. This man identified with his ancestors in faith. Within him were Moses and David, Esther and Rachel, Zechariah and Isaiah – Isaiah of the Exile – Isaiah whose poetry pounded in his chest like an enormous moth – in rhythm with his heartbeat – accelerating as Jesus approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage – to the Mount of Olives.

Jesus knew that he would die – someday – we all do, you know. He knew that he would die – but may not have known it would be in less than a week.

He may not have known that death was so near. But he knew that death hovers in every moment and that danger lurked in the shadows of that roadside, the shadowed streets of Jerusalem.

Jesus knew that his opposition to the occupation of his country by Rome and his historical claim to the throne had drawn the attention of an armed force that promised to annihilate him.

He also knew that his teachings had been unusual, that his actions had broken traditional religious laws, that his miracles of healing and affirmation had startled some vulnerable members of the religious hierarchy – in occupied Jerusalem – brought them into positions of defensiveness.

He knew that his inexplicable connection to God created fear in those who could explain everything but that.

Jesus knew that his cultic “raising of Lazarus from the dead” – his final and most desperate attempt to connect his friends, his people, his community to the sacredness of their own relationship with God and with each other – he knew that this ritual resurrection of Lazarus had created self-proclaimed enemies.

His own identity revealed – drove others to seek their identity in opposition – and he was now in danger.

His self-proclaimed enemies were projecting their own ugliness onto the one they feared, accusing him of seeking power over others, accusing him of undermining their established order, their sense of meaning and reason, their relationship to the holy and to each other.

It is understandable that, even if a point of view seems skewed to someone else, it can be the foundation and rock and ground of being for the person holding that point of view. It is frightening to have that foundation rocked, challenged, shifted, pulled out from under us. Identity and balance are lost – and in order to regain equilibrium, a person might find new ground, a new identity in opposition to the perceived enemy.

Jesus knew his danger. He listened well, he had heard his people deeply. Accused of seeking power, he lifted Zechariah's familiar words from their common past into their common present:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on an ass,
on a colt, the foal of an ass. (Zechariah 9:9)

Isaiah's words pounded in his chest, "The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I turned not backward. I gave my back to the smiters..." (Is.50:5-6a)

Zechariah's passion pounded like wings in his mind. And Jesus surrendered to the attack of his self-styled enemies, grounding his power in humility, trading their kingly horse and chariot for his baby donkey, a colt - arriving under their expectations and catching them off balance, off guard, without resistance, with his own identity intact.

T'ai Chi: Thich Naht Han teaches that if I am told by another that I am ugly or unworthy, I am moved...mere words affect me. Actions more so... Not that I AM ugly, but that another would try

to hurt me so. We are connected, deeply; we are one being at war with itself. (p.98)

Those that would attack Jesus and those who praised him and called upon him to save them – were the same people. Many had been present at the resurrection of Lazarus. Some reported his influence and power in the community to their Roman superiors. Others were afraid and ran to report the blasphemous miracle to the temple priests. Some became believers and wanted Jesus to touch and heal them too, "Hosanna," they cried, "Save us too." All those present were moved, were changed. Each one was changed differently, minutely, imperceptibly, utterly. Each one was changed – all were connected, deeply, inextricably.

The people of Jerusalem – those in the streets and those who stayed home, the temple hierarchy, Jesus, the disciples, the Roman soldiers – all of the people of Jerusalem at that moment were One Being – One Being at war with itself. All were moved, changed, transformed - whether they noticed it or not.

And the world itself shifted, bringing into focus more authentic ways of being, offering a clarified vision, a direct relationship with God, an identity based not at all on opposition to another, not at all on resistance to that which is different, not at all on weakness or inferiority –
but grounded in the strength of sacred Being-ness, moving on fragile and powerful wings toward the light through the surrounding darkness, surrendering to a larger self that includes all that IS.

T'ai Chi: A warrior can cut through the [garbage] and touch another's tenderness, the part that loves children, feels pain, and would rather be friends. To do so takes power... A warrior walks his talk. We have to be in touch with that part of US that loves children, feels pain, and would rather be friends...With the power of surrender I need not kill or even hurt. [My adversary's] flame will die all by itself. I need not interfere. (p.102)

When Jesus entered Jerusalem sitting on the colt, the city stirred, saying "Who is this?" And the people said, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee." (Matt. 21:10-11)

Jesus knew who he was, he knew his power and did not have to prove it to anyone any more. They knew because he knew. Jesus knew his power and knew that he was connected deeply to all those who loved him and all those who feared him and all

those who feared loving him. He knew that people are not only their present selves, but all history as well – that the ways of ancestors become present instincts – that ancient metaphors become the mystery of tradition – that the will to survive is often twisted into the lust for power over others – that fear feeds itself – that evil only grows in opposition to resistance.

Jesus knew that fire dies without fuel or air,
that momentum is lost when the ground is level,
that survival is more likely in an atmosphere of trust and compassion,
that the past does not just haunt the present –
the past shapes the minds of those who look to God for identity and meaning –
the past is where our roots reach and where our power comes from –
as long as we live in the present and press with vulnerability and humility and joy –
with one another – toward the future.

The self-identified enemies of Jesus could not prove their ungrounded fears. Their accusations were left hanging like a white sheet in the dawn, tattered and torn by time and the pounding wings of a thousand moths. The enemies of Jesus ate with him one night and slept among his prayers in the garden. The enemies of Jesus walked with him to Calvary, pounded in the nails, gambled at his feet, wept at his wounding, died with him on the cross. The enemies of Jesus were blessed by him and rose with him and walked with him in the garden by the tomb. The enemies of Jesus were a part of Jesus, are a part of each one of us.

The enemies of Jesus would rather be friends and don't know how, but are being changed and transformed every moment by every word and breath, every drop of rain and touch of sunlight, every act of surrender and every insight into self, every revelation that each one of us is part of each-other-one of us, each one of us is the enemy and the best friend of Jesus. When we are at war with each other, we are at war with ourselves and must look within for the answer, for peace.

T'ai Chi: ...the immediacy of life...is available when one lives with the awareness of death. We do not have time to spend in confusion. (p.105)

During my last semester in college I discovered an author who reshaped my identity. His name was Vladimir Nabokov, a Russian/European/American author who wrote novels and short stories with titles like Ada, Pnin, Lolita, Pale Fire. His poetry reached out with metaphors and colors that touched and lured and opened and transformed my

imagination, my soul. Through his paragraphs and chapters there was a thread of light that kept drawing me forward in the darkness, wanting more, seeking an understanding of the depth and beauty of his perspective on the world.

In every book and story, butterflies populated the landscape – and a man would wander past or be seen sitting at another table – his butterfly net propped against the wall. Nabokov, the author, was also a lepidopterist – a butterfly specialist. He, in fact, discovered a species never before identified – which is named for him.

I had plans to go and meet this man, who then lived in Sweden – having moved there from New York. I was going to sit at his feet, eat his bread, wander in the meadows of his mind, bask in his light. But only months after my graduation from college I received a telegram from a friend telling me that Nabokov had died. I grieved deeply and felt that I had lost a part of me that was essential and irretrievable.

To console myself, I picked up one of his novels – opened to the preface and began to read. As I reached the end of the preface I noticed that it was dated early in my childhood – and located by the words "Oak Creek Canyon, Sedona, Arizona." My heart beat faster, there was a pounding of enormous wings about my head, and a square of light wavered through the darkness – stretched between two trees – as a mysterious, old man called to the night butterflies with his light and called two children who hovered like moths at the edge of his presence – two children, one of whom was changed forever by the fluttering wings of his words – the magic of his light – his deference to the ephemerality of moths – the humility of his being – his surrender to his love of life and beauty – and his longing to find language for the sacred, the holy, the human.

T'ai Chi: [One must] cultivate[e] a quality of lightness. [One] must be sensitive like a feather in the wind yet firmly planted in the ground...continually listening to [one's] partner. (p.95)

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought...the colt, and put their garments on [it], and he sat thereon. (Matt.21:6-7)

And somewhere in the heart of Jesus, Isaiah whispered:
Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together.
Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me...
Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up. (Isaiah 50:8-9)

Isaiah 50:4-9

⁴The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.

⁵The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backwards.

⁶I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.

⁷The Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;

⁸ he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.

⁹It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

Matthew 21:1-11

21When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.'⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

⁵ 'Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,
'Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' ¹¹The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

Let us surrender to silence and be in prayer:

God of light who draws us like children to your mysterious presence, be in and within us now. Let recognition of you pound like wings in our hearts and lead us through the darkness to a sense of our own identity in relationship to you.

God of delicate change and motion, change and move us. Open us to new perspectives and generous attitudes, broaden our sense of understanding of who we are until we are all persons, one person at war and at peace with ourselves.

God of fragility and humility, lead us to surrender our need for power, to find empowerment in surrendering ourselves to you, yielding to spirit and the sacredness of being human.

God of grace and peace, draw us into communion with you and with one another ** finding within the darkness a new hope and a new light, a light we have been known to call upon as Jesus, Messiah, Sustainer and Redeemer. Amen.

[in the breaking of bread and the raising of the cup,]

Children's Time: Why the Palms?

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palm_branch_%28symbol%29

Palm branch (symbol)

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia



The Palm Leaf by [William-Adolphe Bouguereau](#) (1825-1905), portrait of an unidentified woman in ancient dress

The **palm branch** is a symbol of **victory, triumph, peace and eternal life** originating in the ancient [Near East](#) and [Mediterranean world](#). The palm (*Phoenix*) was sacred in [Mesopotamian religions](#), and in [ancient Egypt](#) represented **immortality**. In [Judaism](#), a closed frond of the [date palm](#) is part of the [festival](#) of [Sukkot](#). A palm branch was awarded to victorious athletes in [ancient Greece](#), and a palm frond or the tree itself is one of the most common attributes of [Victory personified](#) in [ancient Rome](#).

In [Christianity](#), the palm branch is associated particularly with [Palm Sunday](#), when according to Christian tradition palm branches were waved at the [triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem](#). It was adopted into [Christian iconography](#) to represent the **victory of martyrs**, or the **victory of the spirit over the flesh**.

Since a victory signals an **end to a conflict** or competition, the palm developed into a symbol of **peace**, a meaning it can have in [Islam](#),^[1] where it is often associated with [Paradise](#).

Antiquity



Apollo holding a laurel branch and libation bowl, next to a palm that represents his birth on Delos (Comacchio Painter, ca. 450 BC)

In Assyrian religion, the palm is one of the trees identified as the **Sacred Tree**^[2] connecting heaven, represented by the crown of the tree, and earth, the base of the trunk. Reliefs from the 9th century BC show winged *genii* holding palm fronds in the presence of the Sacred Tree.^[3] It is associated with the goddess *Ishtar* and is found on the *Ishtar Gate*. In ancient Mesopotamia, the date palm may have represented **fertility in humans**. The Mesopotamian goddess *Inanna*, who had a part in the sacred marriage ritual, was believed to make the dates abundant.^[4] Palm stems represented **long life** to the Ancient Egyptians, and the god *Huh* was often shown holding a palm stem in one or both hands. The palm was carried in Egyptian funeral processions to represent eternal life.^[5] The Kingdom of Nri (Igbo) used the *omu*, a tender palm frond, to sacralize and restrain.^[6]...

...The palm became so closely associated with victory in ancient Roman culture that the Latin word *palma* could be used as a **metonym** for "victory", and was a sign of any kind of victory.^[11] **A lawyer who won his case in the forum would decorate his front door with palm leaves.**^[12] The palm branch or tree became a regular attribute of the goddess *Victory*, and when *Julius Caesar* secured his rise to sole power with a **victory at Pharsalus**, a palm tree was supposed to have sprung up miraculously at the Temple of *Nike*, the Greek counterpart of *Victory*, in *Tralles*, later known as *Caesarea*, in Asia Minor.^[13] **The toga palmata was a toga ornamented with a palm motif; it was worn to celebrate a military triumph only by those who had a previous triumph. The toga itself was the garment of the civilian at peace, and was worn by the triumphator to mark his laying down of arms and the cessation of war. The use of the palm in this setting indicates how the original meaning of "victory" shaded into "peace" as the aftermath of victory.**^[14]

Islam

The palm is richly significant in Islamic culture, and the palm symbolizes **rest and hospitality** in many cultures of the Middle East. The presence of palm trees around an oasis showed that water was the gift of *Allah*.^[19] In the *Quran*, the palm appears in the paradisaical imagery of the Garden (*Jannah*).^[20] In one prophetic tradition,

the [Dome of the Rock](#) will stand on a palm tree issuing from one of the rivers of Paradise.^[21] **Muhammad** is said to have built his home out of palm,^[citation needed] to have leaned against a palm while speaking,^[22] and to have raised the first **mosque** as a roof placed on palm trees.^[23]

The first **muezzin** climbed palm trees to call the faithful to prayer, from which the **minaret** developed.^[citation needed] In the Quran (19:16–34), **Mary** is said to have given birth to Jesus under a **date palm**.^[24]

In [northern Sudan](#), the *doum* palm is the symbol of **endurance** (*doum*), and particularly of the Muslim saint who gave his name to [Wad Hamid](#).^[25]



A Palm Tree (1717) by the Ottoman illustrator Muhammad ibn Muhammad Shakir Ruzmah-i Nathani