

If These Were Silent...

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I don't know if you pay attention to the email that goes out from the church on Friday afternoons. You may have it rigged so that it automatically goes into your junk mail folder. But for you who faithfully read it and are going to heaven (I'm kidding!), you know that there is always some information about the worship service on Sunday: the biblical texts, the sermon title, who's preaching, the music for the day.

You may have noticed, too, that there is also a picture that is tied to this information. Lately, they have been paintings. Three weeks ago, the text of the day was God's promise to Abraham: "You will have children as many as the stars in the sky." I thought Van Gogh's painting *Starry Night* would be good.

Two weeks ago, the parable of the Prodigal Son was portrayed by the Thomas Hart Benton painting of that old deserted farm with the bones of what was once a fatted calf in the yard. Maybe you can wait too long to come home. Well, for Palm Sunday I could have easily snagged some Renaissance painting of Jesus coming into Jerusalem, but I wanted something that captured how impossible it is to stop or even slow the journey to the cross. Like a pebble plinking down a mountainside, it tips a precarious stone; the stone rolls down to dislodge a rock; the rock hits a boulder, until the whole mountain is rumbling, tumbling down. Such is the inevitability of the cross. I wanted a painting that conveyed this parade that cannot be stopped.

Nothing hinders the progression. Jesus tells two of his disciples, "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. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" How in the world did that not stop the progress of the story right there? That would never work. Can you imagine conducting grand theft donkey and getting away with it by simply uttering the words, "The Lord has need of it"?

I have a neighbor who is a member of the church and who also has a Porsche. I do believe the Lord needs it; at least that's what I tell him. He just smiles and holds on to his keys. I suspect he knows that he's dealing with a jealous preacher. But let's say that there exists an example with a purer motive. For instance, I suspect that with all the flooding in Arkansas and Mississippi, there are people in need of the Body of Christ to lift them up out of the muck. What if you were to go out among the inhabitants of Nashville and snatch a purse from someone's arm or take a wallet from someone's pocket? "Hey, what do you think you're doing?" And you say, "The Lord needs it to resurrect the dead, bring life, and restore health." Do you think you'll hear, "Well, go ahead then"? No! You would spend the rest of the day wiping ink off your fingertips, getting your mug shot taken, and calling your lawyer. The mission and ministry have ground to a halt. But Luke is sending us a clue that there is no stopping the progression. The colt is taken, and no argument is heard. "The Lord needs it."

You would think that maybe his own disciples might have stopped the progression. After all, Jesus said that he would have to "undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes and be killed..." (Luke 9:22). Jesus said, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by

the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him..." (Luke 18:31-33a). The trigger has been pulled, nothing to stop it now. But if Jesus were your friend, wouldn't you lift a finger to stop him? His friends put him on the colt, and not one of them said a word. In fact, they celebrated: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king."

The Pharisees hear all the racket and say to Jesus, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." I hear this as the Pharisees raining on the parade. But I think that their intentions may in fact be good. The original Greek can be translated, "Teacher, you need to warn your disciples to stop this or something is going to go terribly wrong." The Pharisees see the progression: "If this keeps up, someone is going to get hurt. Order your disciples to stop." Jesus answers, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Nothing can stop this! You can't hinder a desire. The people want a leader. It's been that way since the time of Samuel. The people said, "We want a king! We want a king!" Samuel said, "A king will take your daughters, tax your income, kill your boys in battle." They said, "It doesn't matter! We want a king." And God said to Samuel, "Chin up! They haven't rejected you. They have rejected me" (1 Samuel 8:4-22). Some things can't be stopped!

People want a leader to make them great. People want someone to save them. People will sell their integrity. They'll steal, run over others, and shout for someone who will make them great at all costs. Not even God, it seems, can stop a human desire. "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." It is this sense of the inevitability of our own desires that I wanted to capture in a painting, a picture that would go into an email to the congregation on Friday afternoon. I could think of nothing that would capture this sense of the text, so I googled the words, "What we want—painting." What popped up was a painting that at first glance I thought would be perfect. The artist had captured a colorfully dressed crowd lining a sidewalk, almost spilling out into the street. Great anticipation is written on every face. The little children were on their knees, peering out from underneath or around the legs of police officers in dark-colored uniforms. The officers in the foreground had locked their arms together, making a barrier along the parade route.

I googled the words, "What we want—painting." What came up would have been perfect—the crowd, desire on every face—perfect, except that the police officers in dark uniforms had brown shirts and red arm bands with black crosses—crosses that had been twisted, bent, distorted and shaped into swastikas. It was a Nazi propaganda poster from the 1930's. The title: "We want to see our Führer." (This painting can be viewed at [yooniqimages.com #102042536](http://yooniqimages.com/#102042536).)

I finished reading a novel this week, *All the Light We Cannot See*, a Pulitzer Prize winner written by Anthony Doerr. Set in World War II, the novel centers on a blind French girl and a German boy, whose paths eventually cross. The German boy, Werner Pfennig, is a small, tow-headed boy who is selected to attend an elite Nazi training school. While small, he is well suited because he's brilliant and disciplined. At the school, Werner befriends a near-sighted boy named Frederick, who has a love for birds. Part of the discipline of this training school is to ferret out the weakest boys so that only the strong endure—survival of the fittest. Of course the near-sighted boy who loves birds emerges as the weakest. He becomes the boy who is picked on by

the bullies. Werner begs him to go back home, but Frederick says, “We don’t have choices. We don’t own our lives.” Is Frederick weak or are there things that cannot be stopped?

In the novel, a man who has escaped from a concentration camp is re-captured. The prisoner is staked to a post outside on a freezing winter day, and the commander orders the boys to go one-by-one and throw a pail of water on him. The first cadet goes by and does what is commanded. The water hits the prisoner, and he is awakened and delirious. What follows are orders fulfilled. It is a torturous death. But then the pail is passed into the hands of the weakest boy, Frederick, the boy who said, “We don’t have any choice. We don’t own our lives.” Frederick takes his pail of water and pours it on the ground. The commander gives him another pail of water. “He is gone, sir.” Once again Frederick pours it on the ground. The commander gives him another pail of water. He pours it on the ground. “I order you!” says the commander. Frederick replies, “I will not.”

What do you think happened to this weak boy who had the strength to keep his integrity in a world gone mad? What do you think happened to this boy who would not participate in the inhumane? What do you think happened to a young boy who loved birds? What do you think happened to him? Whatever you think, you’re probably right. Some things cannot be stopped.

I looked at that painting that was done by a Nazi propagandist. I looked at the faces of the children, the mothers, the fathers, and the brown shirts. I wondered if they were the faces of people that the artist knew. Painters often do that, you know. They place in their paintings faces of friends and neighbors, mothers and fathers. I wonder if all the faces were of real people, real people who had expectant faces, yearning to see their leader. It is one thing to have your face in that parade in 1937, quite another to have it in that parade in 1945. “If I had only known...” “If I could have only stopped it...” “If I had to do it all over again...” “If only...” “If only...” But some things can’t be stopped.

I have no doubt that Luke takes a paintbrush and with marvelous detail paints in the faces of people we know. Look! There’s Peter and Andrew. Look! There’s James, Philip, and Bartholomew. “God, give us what we want.” “Lord God, give me what I want.” How many times have we been painted into that picture? All the disciples were painted into that picture; and a few days later, they were doing everything to get out of the frame. “I tell you, I’ve never seen him.” “Look, I never knew him.” “Leave me alone; I told you I never knew him.”

Jesus predicted it would happen. I mean, who’s going to stop it? “We don’t have choices. We don’t own our lives.” It’s inevitable that we lose our integrity in order to save our own skin. Jesus says, “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me.” Who can do that?

“Cadet, I order you to throw that water.” “I will not.”

Did those people in that swastika-laden painting have a choice, or were they just caught up in a swift-moving stream that could not be stopped? No choice!

The Gospel of Luke, however, says we always have a choice. Luke says, “You will have a gate, and there at the gate will be a poor man who longs for a crumb from your table. Will you stop to see him?” Luke says, “There will be a road, and along side of it will be someone who has been left for dead. Will you stop to see him?” Luke says, “There will be a Samaritan, someone who is not from around here, who

has the heart of God. Do you see him?" Luke says, "There is sand, and there is rock. Where will you build your house?" Luke says, "You can be mean or you can be kind." Luke says, "You can hate or you can love." Luke says, "You can have mercy and grace...and it cannot be stopped."

Wouldn't it be something if God were painting a picture and in it were all these people who refused to follow the commands of a culture? "I command you to sell your integrity as one made in the image of God." "I will not!" Wouldn't it be something if God has a painting filled with those kinds of people, people who are possessed by the power of the cross, a power that cannot be stopped?

"Lord, order your disciples to stop!" "I can't; if I did, the very stones would cry out."