

A Spiritual 180

Matthew 21:1-11

Palm/Passion Sunday – April 2, 2023 – Parkminster United Church

It happens to me every year, about a week or two before Palm Sunday. I start to think about the shift that happens as we move into this day. It's a spiritual 180-degree kind of Sunday. One that starts with palms branches waving to a joyful hymn that tells us of Jesus' joyful entry into Jerusalem. Palm Sunday, Passion Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week – the time where we boomerang between parades, donkeys, palm branches and a trial, and death via barbaric means.

There is something so powerful and deepening about these days of Lent and now Holy Week. Palm Sunday is an occasion for irony and ambiguity; it reminds me all over again-- this is what life is like. There are questions and quandaries, plots and subplots swirling about this story, even as the little children and people wave their branches and skip along the road with such innocent abandon and excitement.

I was brought up with the joy of palm branches on this day, but even then, I knew there was something mysterious and powerful lurking in the shadows just beyond the excitement. The late Peter Gomes, who was a theologian, professor, and chaplain at Harvard for many years, wrote that he was part of the palm waving crowd growing up, but as the years went by he came to see that there was a lot more going on here—in some ways, the palm waving was a way of skimming over the indignity and embarrassment of the days ahead.

Anne LaMott writes that in some ways, she doesn't have the right personality for the events of this coming Holy Week—"I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision of one of the kids in Sunday School who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny coming out of a tomb—everlasting life and a box of chocolates. Now you're talking."

But here we are on the uphill side of Easter, with only a week that separates us from that Great Getting Up morning. It is Passover in Jerusalem and Jesus is getting ready to enter the city. Passover would be the worst moment for anyone with any kind of questionable reputation to try to get into the city. It's teeming over with excited pilgrims

who have come to observe the ceremony of their liberation centuries before. They are full of high hopes and a zealous fervor so strong, that each year the governor of the province moves his troops into town just in case there is an uprising. Roman soldiers are everywhere you look and around every corner you turn. It is a highly charged moment—anything can happen.

Jesus comes into this city, full of heated excitement and fired up crowds bordering on chaos. In an instant, the crowds recognized what he was doing; they see and remember the ancient promise—“Your Sovereign comes to you without display, riding on a donkey.” They were hoping that salvation from Roman domination had finally arrived. There was unexpected joy and overwhelming relief among the people—they could hardly handle the moment—off come their coats and down come the branches from trees lining the road—“Hosanna to the Heir to the House of David! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Most High! Hosanna in the highest!”

Jewish philosopher and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel has written that “religion begins in mysticism and ends in politics.” There is probably no other day in the Christian calendar when this is truer than Palm Sunday, when this slightly odd rabbi from the Galilean countryside becomes a marked man, simply by grabbing the reigns of the colt and sauntering into town during Passover.

Some of us don't want our religion to be political. We want to separate our faith and worship life from the realities of our political world. And there are good reasons for wanting to keep things separate. We have seen acts of violent terror being perpetrated on people in the name of God. We see how religious conviction can be twisted into hurting instead of liberating. It can make us uncomfortable to see religion used as a political force.

But here's the distinction. The politics of Jesus are different. Adam Erickson says, “Jesus was a different kind of king and that the Kingdom of Heaven is a different kind of politics. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he was revealing that the reign of God is in stark contrast to the reign of Rome and every other political system that seeks triumphant victory by influencing people through violence and coercion. The

Gospel of Jesus is different. This Gospel is the politics of humility, service, forgiveness, and a nonviolent love that embraces all people, but especially those we call our enemies.” (Anna Golladay, *The Whiplash of Palm Sunday*, 2023.)

So here we are. Why, we ask, in the name of God, would Jesus come into the streets on a donkey at Passover? Why would he want to get involved on such a messy, political, potentially violent event? He couldn't remain in the desert of private experience. Aware that things might end up horribly, he was called out. Through this story, we know that God gets mixed up in human life, because that is where God lives. The central affirmation of our faith is acted out today - God in Christ enters our human story and experiences our life and suffering with us—not above us or beyond us, but with us—in the midst of us.

If faith begins in mystery, then we can see Jesus embracing the mystery of his own calling—to challenge the authorities with unexpected gentleness and humility. We can see Jesus speaking truth to power without words—using a non-violent gesture of peace. Indeed, throughout the coming week, we will see Jesus responding to hate and violence with a quiet steadiness and dignity— “Surely,” as the guard at the cross said, “this person is of God.”

In the end, the realm of God didn't come, and the overthrow of the government did not take place. Jesus was not crowned sovereign or elected as head of a new government. The salvation so hoped for by the people didn't happen. But something else did—spiritual transformation. Through the life of Jesus, we claim a renewed sense of dignity for each human being and all of creation and a desire for freedom for the human spirit.

We must speak about the cross today. Towards the end of our service this morning, our rowdy Palm Sunday celebrations will be hushed by the solemn knowledge of what is to come. Many mainline denominations, including our own, sometimes struggle with the cross, feeling that it focuses the Christian story on suffering rather than hope or new life. We would rather be Easter people than Good Friday people.

But this morning we remember that we live in a Good Friday world. As one of my mentors has said—we can't get to Easter without heading straight through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. We acknowledge on this day that the world holds so much beauty and terror—suffering and hope.

“As Christians, we love because the cross draws us towards love — its power is as compelling as it is mysterious. The cross pulls us towards God and towards each other, a vast and complicated gathering place. Whether or not we want to see Jesus shamed and wounded, here he is, ...This is the solid ground we stand on. Stark, holy, brutal, and beautiful.

To take up a cross as Jesus does is to stand, always, in the center of the world's pain. Not just to glance in the general direction of suffering and then sidle away, but to dwell there. To identify ourselves wholly with those who are aching, weeping, screaming, and dying. Taking up the cross means recognizing Christ crucified in every suffering soul and body that surrounds us and pouring our energies and our lives into alleviating that pain — no matter what it costs.” (Debie Thomas, *A Crucified God*, 2020.)

The palms we throw on the path leading into the city will lead us to the road out of the city to the cross. So, welcome to Holy Week. Here we are, and here is our suffering, sorrowing, loving God. Here are our hosannas, broken and unbroken, hungry, and hopeful. Our journey continues ... Amen.

Rev. Heather Power