

Palm Sunday

March 25, 2018

Church of the Advent

What more can a preacher say to add to what has already been said? Not much, really. Palm Sunday is for me *the* most challenging liturgy of the year to preach—because the day is long, and because the gospel is emotionally wrenching, and because we move rapidly from singing songs of great joy to the depths of great sorrow. We enter the church singing *All Glory Laud and Honor* in remembrance of the crowds that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on the back of a colt—as if like those first Century crowds we have no idea what will happen within the walls of the city Jesus had been deliberately moving towards for weeks, months, even years since his baptism in the Jordan, since his birth. We welcome the King who has come to liberate us from all of the badness of life—grief and sorrow, sin and shame—with *Hosanna*, a word from ancient Hebrew meaning “*deliver us*” or “*I beg you to save.*” We lay down our palm branches and our cloaks before him, oblivious to the cost of what we were asking, oblivious to how our *hosannas* would so soon be answered.

And then the story unfolds before our witness. Our King, the blessed One who comes in the name of the Lord, is betrayed, arrested, brought before judge after judge: none can exactly identify his transgression; all pass him down the line as mere annoyance for someone else to dispose of. Our King becomes the passive victim of torture and then gruesome and humiliating public execution, as our cries shift from *Hosanna!* to *Crucify Him!* Spring sunshine is covered over with darkness. Jubilation and praise shift to mob brutality, and the recognition that *we* are willing participants in the mob. The blessed One becomes the scapegoat for our sin and our shame. Our joy turns to grief and regret.

There are theological arguments as to why these two observances—the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and his sacrificial death by crucifixion—should *not* be undertaken on the same day. Some of them see a risk of spiritual whiplash—as if Christians are unprepared to hold such joy and such sorrow so close together in such a short time, as if that is not what life is *always* about—joy *and* sorrow, love *and* loss, beauty *and* pain.

By some accounts, Palm and Passion Sunday gives us an abridged version of Holy Week in an hour, giving congregants who are unable to attend services during Holy Week a share in the story leading up to the death of Jesus, without which a celebration of Easter can ring hollow, and devoid of much meaning. Though I will admit to some professional bias, this idea does not hold much water for me, because I believe there is great value in gathering for worship during Holy Week—an argument I make not with ecclesial authority but from personal experience.

Yet there is a more important reason to marry the Passion and the Palms as we do. The Passion of Christ is painful to hear; yet as it sweeps us away from the fast-fading joy of the procession of the palms, it carries us deep into the heart of our belief and our hope, that our God *loves us so much* that he entered into profound suffering to prove it. Our God *loves us so much* that he made a way to gather our guilt and our shame and our doubt and our failures into his own forgiving and sacrificing and healing self. Our God *loves us so much*, that he went to Jerusalem and walked right into a share of our pain, our grief, and our despair in our weary and messed up world. Jesus *was not* the earthly king we cried out for—the one who would make us perfectly safe and secure from the evils and disappointments of the world—not at all like the earthly kings we *continue* to cry out for, who never fail to seduce us, and then to fail us.

Jesus *was* the King of Love who, holding all of the fear and anxiety and pain that any human would, carried the weight of our brokenness up a hill and stretched it out on a cross, taking on wounds that hold the world's deepest sorrow. Wounds that hurt, wounds that killed. And by his wounds we are healed. This is the mystery. This is the glory. This is the gift. This is the power of the passionate, infinite, inexplicable love of our God for the world.

Easter will be here soon, and we quietly and secretly prepare for the joyous celebration we look forward to. And the drama of Holy Week is upon us, with its gifts of invitation to enter more deeply into the story that takes Jesus and his disciples from the procession of the palms to the quiet dawn of the resurrection. But this day, too, with its whiplash themes, has its own power—giving us pause to stop, to pay attention, to breathe in the grace of an incomprehensible gift offered in pure love, and to fall on our knees in gratitude for it. AMEN