

April 9, 2017 – Palm Sunday



“Authenticity/Courage/Compassion: Who Is This?”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Psalms 118:1,26-29

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.

The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Palm Sunday--Holy Week begins. The week we walk with Jesus through all the events which lead up to his eventual betrayal and arrest and crucifixion and on to that astonishing, earth-shattering, life-changing, tomb-opening Easter morn.

As Matthew tells it, Jesus and his disciples had traveled from Jericho, along that road made famous by the story of the Good Samaritan. It was a dangerous road, dry and dusty, but they had safely made their way to Bethphage at the Mount of Olives. Atop the mount, amidst fragrant wildflowers if there had been rain that year, like we're seeing throughout all the deserts of California and Arizona, they looked over the city of Jerusalem from the west.

Looking down, they would have seen the green tops of olive trees at the lower levels of the mount and the Garden of Gethsemane. And they would have seen down into the Kidron Valley, and there, the graves of the great prophets Hagai, Zechariah and Malachi. This site was considered to be so sacred, that our Jewish brothers and sisters still believe this to be the place from which the new messianic era and the resurrection of the dead will begin, here, from the base of the Mount of Olives.

Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem from that very spot was no accident. He was signaling something incredibly powerful to the people. He was claiming his identity as Prophet, as Messiah, as King. And they poured out into the streets that day to greet his arrival.

It was a time of intense political ferment in Jerusalem and the people were literally dying for change. Following 300 years of freedom from slavery in Egypt, the people were suffering now from 100 years of Roman domination, begun by the Roman general Pompeii. Uprisings had started. The Zealots were mobilizing. Zaduk the Pharisee had led a revolution in and around Jerusalem and his followers had been put to death. The Romans executed all two thousand of them as they did all political prisoners, by hanging them on crosses to die.

Jesus enters the city, hailed as a King by the crowds thronging the roads and waving branches to greet him as they would any royalty, though I assure you, these folks hadn't seen any real royalty go by for a very long time. But they knew what to do when the moment came. Thousands of them, we imagine, whooping and hollering, throwing their caps into the air and their cloaks along the ground, madly waving those branches to salute their King. Hosanna! Hosanna! Which means: "Save, we pray!" People bursting with joy and relief, with a sense of tremendous expectation and fulfillment.

"Save us", they cried, "save us, Son of David." They thought he was the messiah they had so long awaited, the new ruler who would bring the long-awaited political victory.

I wonder who all was there that day, lined up along the road from the Mount of Olives down into Jerusalem. My guess is that the disciples were there, close to the royal vehicle, that is, the borrowed colt, still jockeying to get the best spot. Judas was probably there, too, a troubled man, one of the few not smiling. And there were those who had, on one occasion or another, been part of a big crowd that had gathered to hear Jesus teach and preach. Maybe some were there who had been fed, miraculously, by those loaves and fishes. Or some who had been at that wedding in Cana when he'd turned the water into wine. Maybe Jairus was there, whose daughter he had healed, and the blind man who now could see for himself all the excitement of the day. Maybe Nicodemus was there, still asking what was really going on and how he could join in. Maybe Zaccheus, the tax collector, had again climbed up a tree to get a better view. I bet Mary and Martha were there, still quibbling about what was most important. And Lazarus, too, he who had been as good as dead until his friend Jesus intervened.

I bet the whole cast was there, all of them lined up and waving their palm branches, doing their own version of "hail to the chief." And I'm sure there were lots of other folks, too, men and women, boys and girls, people who heard there was a parade on and didn't want to miss out on the fun. Folks who didn't know much about the guy riding into town, but figuring that he must be pretty important to inspire such a devoted entourage. Or maybe they had heard a thing or two and

hoped there might still be a place for them on the bus, maybe some healing for them, some word of encouragement, a new reason to carry on. Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

For Jesus, as we know, long before he gets to the other side of the grave on Easter morning, a whole lifetime is going to happen in these seven days. Oh he will know joy with the crowds, intimate fellowship with his closest friends and profound prayer with God during this Holy Week. But he will also experience betrayal by one who knows him well, confrontation with the authorities, arrest, and the unspeakable agony of death on the cross.

As the writer Kathleen Norris has written: the incarnation “is the place where hope contends with fear.” Everything that will happen between during this week, between this Sunday and next, is what gives us life and hope. God incarnate in Christ Jesus experiences the complexity of human relationships, the cost of challenging the powers that be, the terror of arrest and of suffering, the total transformation in the experience of dying. God in Christ Jesus experiences it all—for our sake and for our salvation.

In Jesus, hope contends with fear. In Jesus, hope goes down into the city, down into the valley, through the valley of the shadow of death. Hope goes down all the way to hell itself. The oldest version of the Apostles’ Creed reads: “I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.”

In Jesus, hope contends with fear. God in Christ suffered and was crucified, dead and buried and descended into hell. To transform it all. To redeem it all. To sanctify it all.

Still we ask--who is this? Who is the One who would do this for our sake and for our salvation? Messiah? Prophet? King? Savior?

Look. See. There at the center of all the whooping and hollering is Jesus, going on ahead, going on to Jerusalem. Calmly, in no hurry. Step by step, down from the Mount of Olives. Jesus, the quiet center, knowing exactly where he was headed. And why. And what would await him there. And what would follow. A humble man of transparent authenticity, peaceableness, mercy, generosity, a man of uncommon courage.

There he is, riding along with the ancient praise Psalm singing in his heart: “Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. You are my God and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.”

“Who is this?” Who is this king who knows no palace, no throne, no wealth? Who is this king who has no armies, no swords, no spears? Who is this king who rules from within our hearts? Who is this king who longs to reshape our values, our friendships, our loyalties, our priorities through love? Who is this king who washes our feet and over and over and over and over again demonstrates in his very life how we are to love one another?

In the end—the end which is the beginning of our Christian story—Jesus wasn’t who anyone thought he was. Even the disciples still didn’t get it. He wasn’t the Messiah the Jews wanted him to be and he wasn’t the political usurper the Romans feared. He confounded them all. He wasn’t who anyone thought he was. He was the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the one sent by God to initiate God’s reign of love and righteousness and peace.

On this Palm Sunday, let us wave our palms and become part of that Triumphal Procession with Jesus. For still he longs to enter our cities, our world in turmoil, our hearts. He longs to bring peace and shalom. He longs for his church to be a beacon of welcoming love.

Today he rides into the very midst of us again, embodying the transforming hope of the Kingdom of God. Today we see him for who he really is—so very human, yet still Savior, Prophet, Messiah, King. Jesus, moving forward, step by step, deeper into the habits of love. Step by step, marked by authenticity, compassion, and courage.

“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.”

AMEN.

Notes:

James O. Duke in *Feasting on the Word: Year A., Vol. 2.* Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

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