

“This is Our Story; This is Our Song: From Palm to Passion”

OT: Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 31:9-16
NT: Philippians 2:5-11
Matthew 21:1-11
Matthew 27:11-54

Read Matthew 27:11-54 (Parts with Cory, Chad, Kathleen, Cat)

I must confess that I struggle with the liturgical phenomenon of compressing Holy Week into a single service on the Sixth Sunday of Lent, resulting in the hybrid Palm/Passion Sunday. I enjoy the festivity of the Palms and the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, but I am not keen on pressing the nose of the passion sequence against the glass as soon as we just did in these readings. By doing so, I think we lose some really key elements of what actually happens in the days between when Jesus voluntarily saddled a donkey and rode as a humble servant to his death and when Jesus is betrayed and arrested, tried and mocked and beaten, and then killed: things like last words and teachings he shared with his disciples, the promise of the Holy Spirit, washing the disciples' feet, calling out the one who would betray him, the last supper, and Peter cutting off a guard's ear. These weren't just minor things that happened. Some of these events have been the foundation for the liturgical practices of the church. To just skip over them is really an injustice to the story.

Ideally, we would spend this morning focused on waving palm branches, shouting “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”, and crowning Jesus in victory. Then on Thursday, we would gather together again to remember John's account of Jesus kneeling at the feet of the disciples to wash their feet in an act of servant leadership and of Jesus offering the bread of life and cup of salvation to the disciples as a symbolic act of faith. The events of Maundy Thursday continue outside the upper room as Judas betrays Jesus and Jesus is arrested. Then on Friday, we would gather together again to remember Jesus' whole journey to the cross, complete with a contentious trial, flogging, carrying his own cross, the seven last phrases of Jesus on the cross. The events of Good Friday aren't good, but they set the necessary stage for all the good that is about to come. Having experienced the events of the cross, we would then be fully prepared for the most important day of our story.

Somewhere along the line, the practice of attending a service on Maundy Thursday and another on Good Friday and another for the Great Easter Vigil got lost, and the church recognized the need to call attention to both palm and passion on the same day. If you think about it, the story doesn't make much sense to go from the palms to an empty grave on Easter. The passion narrative is the critical bridge connecting Jesus' triumphant entry and Jesus' triumphant victory over death.

The most important reason for combining the passion and the psalms is the relationship between the death and the resurrection of Jesus. To understand the resurrection, we must contemplate the passion of Jesus. Long, careful meditation upon the mystery of the cross must precede the glorious message of Easter. Yes, Easter is coming, but not yet. This is a Sunday to build a bridge of promise to the other side of resurrection, but it's also a time to stop and reflect. We can't cross into Easter just yet. We must Wait. Watch. Listen. Stay tuned for more. This story is... to be continued.

Today, the plot of our story and our song is moving from palm to passion.

First, from the palms we learn at least three things: purpose, peace, and praise.

The first is purpose. Jesus tells his disciples to go and secure a certain donkey for him to ride into Jerusalem. He tells his disciples that if anyone asks why they are taking it to simply say, "The Lord needs it." What about these words extends an invitation to us? On that day the Lord needed a donkey. Jesus doesn't need a donkey today, but that doesn't mean Jesus doesn't need something from us. What does the Lord need from us today? What about...our hands...our feet...our time...our talents...and our resources?

Born in Spain in 1515, St. Teresa of Avila wrote this poem:

*Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.*

*Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

Maybe this is what the Lord needs today, and every day of our lives.

The second is peace. *"The Herald of Peace" told by Robert Bela Wilhelm is a story from the epics of Estonia. It tells of an Estonian king who wants to wage war on Finland and send his four sons out to the corners of Estonia to gather an arm. The youngest son is sent to the cities in the north with the official call to arms from the king. Along the way to the first city he encounters a cast of characters that teach him of war. By the time he reaches the first city he is ready to be rid of his warhorse and his armor. He does not read the proclamation from the king in the city square. Instead riding on a donkey, he goes on the border where he enters Finland as a peasant. To everyone he meets in this new country he gives a greeting of peace and he makes a life for himself as a farmer. The king is never able to gather the army he needs, and war is never waged. Instead peace prevails.*

This gentle tale holds the imagery of the servant Messiah and the power of one person's actions for a realm of peace, which after all, is the Kingdom of God.

The third is praise. The act of laying coats and palm branches on the ground was accompanied with singing and shouts of praise. Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. The people knew who Jesus was and they honored him accordingly as he entered Jerusalem. As he passed by on that lowly donkey, the people sought to crown Jesus in victory, for he was the true king, the Lord of Lords, the prince of peace.

The what and how of Jesus' journey to the cross is the rock in which our faith stands. The purpose, peace and praise of the entry- riding on a donkey, a service animal for the lower class, palm branches, and hopeful shouts of hosanna- set the page for the intensity of what is to follow. What comes next for Jesus is unimaginable- even though he told the disciples what was about to happen. The events called the passion contain a senseless trial, purposeful surrender, pressure, humiliation, thorns, catastrophe, and piercing.

The second part of our plot today is passion. From the passion of Jesus, we learn that Jesus is uniquely powerful and transforming. Only this God, our God, can have a purpose for such suffering and pain. Christianity is the only religion that builds itself upon a God who chooses to suffer and sacrifice on behalf of the people. But why would we worship a God who doesn't just choose to escape or prevent the suffering and sacrifice? Because in the passion, we grow closer and closer to God.

Jesus suffers so that when we are suffering we know God understands and cares for us. Jesus is utterly alone by the end of the story so that when we feel alone we know God understands and is with us. Jesus cries out in despair so that when we become convinced the whole world has conspired against us and feel ready to give up, we know that God understands and holds onto us. Jesus dies so that we know God understands death and the fear of death and reminds us that death does not have the last word. All that we see and hear, all that we read and sing, all God does, is for us.

The fourth century theologian Athanasius, speaking of the Incarnation that reaches its climax in the crucifixion, said that God becomes like us in Jesus so that we may become more like God. And twelve hundred years later, Martin Luther described the cross as the divine exchange where Jesus takes our life and lot that we may enjoy his righteousness and victory. Five hundred years after that, this story continues, the story of God's decision to not hold back and watch to see what we might do on our own but instead to get involved, to take matters into the divine hands, to join God's own self to us fully and completely so that we might live and die – and live again! – in hope and courage.

Ultimately, we must recognize that Jesus' journey to the cross is a story of abiding love and everlasting hope. An abiding love and everlasting hope for you and me, for us.

What do we do with this?

Paul said to the Philippians, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..." And the author of Ecclesiastes writes that there is a time for this and a time for that. Putting these together and owning the story of Jesus' journey to the cross, we are left with one very important question. And I am going to leave us with this question today:

How are we, in our life right now, being called to relinquish all that we so desperately want to be in control of, and surrender to the care and compassion and love of God?

What will it take for us to relinquish control, take up our cross, and surrender to God?

Let all God's people say... Amen.