

Palm Sunday

Imagine if you will, a bright, sunshiny day, and a celebration. You, like others in Jerusalem, have heard the news about Jesus. Many are saying that he is "the Messiah." He has recently performed two miracles: he opened the eyes of a man who was born blind, and he raised a man named Lazarus from the dead! Now, Jesus is coming to Jerusalem, and you will have the opportunity to see him!

You hear a loud din from outside. It seems to be coming from the main road. Your neighbors are running past your house, excitedly talking to one another. This must be it. Jesus must be here! You run toward the din and see a huge crowd. Many, many people are present, pushing and shoving to try to get closer to the front. Here he is. Here is Jesus, riding on a donkey! Some of the people have palm branches, and they are waving them. Others are throwing their garments in front of his path. Some are shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Our opening scripture passage presents us with a wonderful image of celebration--Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We allow our imaginations to carry us to Jerusalem in the first century to a place unlike any place that we have ever been. We bask in the excitement as the townspeople gather closely together to see this wonderful sight. How happy they are! But....how different..... it all seems to us..... when we return to the reality of our present day. For our minds may be telling us to resist this image. We may have a hard time focusing, because our thoughts keep pushing against us. Our thoughts are saying, "keep your distance," "don't get too close," and "you should be at home."

Yes, even in our time of worship, many of us may be having a hard time sorting through what we have been told to do. So much has changed in our daily lives in the past few weeks. At the beginning of 2020, the U.S. economy was soaring, stock values were high, the jobless rate

was low, and then...then....the coronavirus pandemic arrived in the U.S. With its arrival, we found out how quickly our daily lives could change. Instead of celebrating together this Palm Sunday, we are celebrating apart. Some of us picked up palms on Saturday, and with them, we will be doing what we can to celebrate Palm Sunday in our homes, yards, and neighborhoods. Church members who would have gathered at St. Paul's, along with many Christians throughout the United States and beyond, are staying at home. What would normally be a time of community celebration, is now a Palm Sunday juxtaposed against our present reality.

But is this not unlike our two gospel readings for today? On this Sunday of the Passion, we begin our service with Jesus' glorious procession into Jerusalem with the crowds cheering and praising him. But we quickly move with more and more sadness to the events surrounding Jesus' death. This Sunday of the Passion starts out so beautifully, so happily, but it quickly turns from celebration and praise for Jesus, to condemnation and ridicule of Jesus. How quickly joy can turn to sorrow. How quickly celebration can turn to sadness. How quickly two disciples can move from commitment to Jesus, to betrayal or denial of Jesus.

Judas is one of the characters in the passion narrative. Judas wants to appear to be one among them in the eyes of Jesus and the other disciples. Yet he has met with the chief priests and has already agreed to betray Jesus. During the Last Supper (that we recognize on Maundy Thursday), Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." The disciples become distressed and say to him one after another, "Surely, not I, Lord," "Surely, not I, Lord" "Surely,.....not..... I, Lord." All respond this way, except for Judas. Judas responds, "Surely not I, Rabbi." Judas acknowledges Jesus as his teacher, but not his Lord, and he knows what he is about to do. Jesus says to them, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me."

Jesus knows Judas will betray him, but Judas in his human weakness cannot foresee what his betrayal will mean to Jesus. Judas fully intends to carry out his plan, and all for thirty pieces of silver. Jesus says, "For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would have been better for that one not to have been born." Even upon hearing Jesus' words, Judas remains convinced that his plan is a good one.

Peter, is another character in this Holy Week pericope. After the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples go to the Mount of Olives, and Jesus says to them, "You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter, who also desires to portray himself as honorable and stalwart in the eyes of Jesus and the other disciples, says, "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you." In other words, even though the other disciples may not have the commitment to stay with you, I, Peter, the rock, will stand with you. His words and confidence seem exemplary. But Jesus knows what will happen. Jesus says to him, "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." Peter says, vehemently, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And so said all the disciples." Peter's bravado speaks louder than reality. Peter thinks that he is fully committed to Jesus, so much so, that he refuses to believe what Jesus is saying.

Judas arrives with a crowd carrying swords and clubs. Judas has told them that he will give them a sign, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him." A kiss. A sign of love and affection from the disciple to his teacher, turns into a mockery, a sign of Judas' betrayal. Judas comes to Jesus, and says, "Greetings, Rabbi." (Again, Rabbi, not Lord.) Judas is attempting to appear as if his actions are like that of any other day, but they aren't. "Then they came and laid hands on [Jesus] and arrested him." It is done. Judas has betrayed Jesus for thirty silver pieces. How could

Judas think that he could hide his betrayal from Jesus, who is all-knowing?

The chief priests and the scribes are trying to find a way to kill Jesus. Here is their chance, the chance that they have been waiting for. Jesus has been arrested. "Now the chief priests and the entire council... [are] looking for false testimony against Jesus so they might put him to death." One witness, and another, say, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.'" To human ears, this sounds absurd. No one could rebuild the magnificent temple in Jerusalem in three days. But Jesus is not talking in earthly terms about the temple edifice, he is talking about himself. He is the temple that is to be destroyed, and he will be built up in three days. Jesus is not lying, but the chiefs, scribes and false witnesses, do not believe that he is telling the truth.

The high priest says to Jesus, "I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." Finally, the question is posed. This is the all-important question that will decide Jesus' fate. Jesus says, "You have said so, but I tell you, From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Jesus is foreshadowing his resurrection and ascension where he will be seated at the right hand of God. (Meaning, in our Lutheran understanding, Jesus will be at the right hand of God's power.) But to human ears, it sounds preposterous! How could this man be "the Messiah, God's Son?"

Jesus tells the truth, but the high priest does not believe him. The high priest tears his clothes and responds, "He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses. You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?" They respond, "He deserves death." Jesus has told the truth, and yet, they do not believe him. They begin to mock him by spitting in his face, striking and slapping him. They are so sure that they are right, and therefore, justified by their

own understandings. They act smug and certain of their stand; they are certain that they are right.

Peter "was sitting outside in the courtyard." Peter, who vehemently said, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you," is not distressed by Jesus' arrest. Instead, he appears cool and calm. While Jesus is being questioned by the chief priests and the council, a servant-girl of the high priest says to Peter, "You also were with Jesus, the Galilean." Peter replies, "I do not know what you are talking about." (Ahhhhh.) And then, another servant-girl says, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." But Peter denies it saying, "I do not know the man." (Ahhhhh.) And a third time, the bystanders tell the truth and say to Peter, "Certainly you are also one of them; for your accent betrays you." But Peter ... "began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know the man." And the cock crows. Then Peter remembers what Jesus said to him, "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." (Ohhhhhh.) For as vehemently as Peter protested his innocence to Jesus, he has now done what he said he would never do. And, "Peter went out and wept bitterly," as he acknowledged that Jesus was right.

Then Jesus is taken to Pilate. Pilate asks him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answers him, "You say so." But Jesus makes no further reply. Throughout the pericope, Jesus appears to be weak, but in reality, Jesus knows his destiny. There is no reason for Jesus to take bold actions to try to get away or to do anything to deny what is to happen. There is no reason for Jesus to speak loudly and beligerently, for Jesus knows his fate.... it will happen, just as God the Father said it would happen. Then the crowd asks Pilate, as was his custom during the festival, to release a prisoner for them. And Pilate says, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For Pilate realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests persuaded the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead" and to sentence Jesus to be crucified.

As if this had not been enough, now they begin to taunt Jesus. “They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him,” a cloak of the royal color, “and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. And “they put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” They struck his head with the reed, spat on him, and knelt down in homage to him. “After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.” Mocking him as King of the Jews, flogging him, spitting on him, striking him, kneeling before him in a condescending way...

“Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” The inscription, was another way of mocking him, but how little they actually knew. For Jesus is a king. Jesus is the king of all the world. Jesus is the king of all that exists.

“Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!” And the chief priests, scribes, and elders said, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel, let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, I am God's Son.” “The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.”

How easy it is for these human beings to mock and taunt Jesus. How easy it is for them to set the terms by which they will believe in Jesus. They want proof. They want Jesus to perform a miracle. They want all of this and more, in order for them to believe in him.

Then, Jesus.... died.... on the cross. When Jesus died, those who mocked him smugly thought that they were right; that they knew the truth. Jesus did not save himself, therefore, they were right. Jesus did not come down from the cross. For all the human beings watching that day, Jesus died on the cross. They rejected the Savior, the true Messiah, Jesus, God's son.

Today, as we celebrate Palm Sunday, let us remember Jesus' triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem; riding on a donkey, with people spreading their garments on the road, waving branches and shouting, 'Hosanna!'

Today, as we recall the passion of Jesus, let us remember Jesus' death on the cross to save us from our sins. Jesus did not die in vain, but to atone for the sins of all humanity, so that those who believe in him might know his grace and celebrate his gift of salvation.

What began as celebration involving many, many people, appears to have ended with Jesus in solitude on the cross. But let us remember how quickly celebration turned to sadness, can once again return to celebration!

While the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, may be challenging for us, let us be mindful that in times of change, in times of stress, in times of fear, in times of sadness, the story is not over, just as Jesus' death is not the end of the story. Jesus is with us now and every day, in every time and place. Jesus is with us now, as he will continue to be with us in the days, weeks, months, and years to come. Jesus is with us in our time of need. May we wait patiently on Jesus, who is the true Messiah, "Hosanna, in the highest heaven." Amen.