

Rev. Mike Cole  
Providence Presbyterian Church  
April 13, 2022  
Palm Sunday  
Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 19:28-40  
“Don’t Be Fooled”

Into Jerusalem he rides, not upon the back of a great white stallion, but seated precariously upon the back of a donkey, a beast of burden. No matter. Not even the sight of such an ironic messiah could deter the crowds from celebrating their expectations. For the moment, it didn’t matter that God was not coming to them as they had expected - as a conquering general, returning to vanquish their foes. For the moment, it didn’t matter that God had a totally different agenda. For the moment, it didn’t matter that this Jesus didn’t fit their image of a messiah. For the moment, it didn’t matter that Jesus scoffed at the status quo, which ironically, they were celebrating. For the moment it didn’t matter that Jesus’ preaching was a paradox - to be the greatest, we must be the least; to be first, we must be last; to be fulfilled, we must be hungry; to be served, we must be the servant; to be alive, we must be willing to die.

For the moment, none of this mattered, because life was good and everything (they supposed) was going their way. Who cared what his teaching and ministry really was all about? The important thing was that he was here to save them, rescue them from their enemy. Their long time of waiting was over. Yes, life was sweet that day that we call Palm Sunday. The sun was shining on them for the first time in hundreds of years. This was “pay back” time for all the nations who had feasted on Israel like a bunch of vultures. “Hosanna to the son of David!” they shouted. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” they yelled. They grabbed anything they could to wave at Jesus and pave his way into the city - palms, leaves, branches, and even their clothes. Nothing was held back from this spectacular display of hospitality.

At first glance, it appears to be a fantastic occasion. The culmination of three years’ worth of healing, feeding, and teaching. Finally, the people awoke to who Jesus really was. They honored him in the way we think they should have all along - with "pomp and circumstance." Jerusalem was teeming with the influx of people gathering for Passover. Many had heard of the wandering evangelist who said and did the unexpected and unusual. But within six days, the shouts of praise would turn into the cry, "Crucify him," because the mood of a crowd is fickle indeed when their assumptions are put to the test.

Jesus greeted all that was going on around him with a persistent determination - the kind of sober, quiet, resolve we have when we have accepted the consequences of our actions. He knew what was coming in this week. And so do we.

Palm Sunday was not an isolated event, separated from all other events in Jesus' life. He didn't just leap from Palm Sunday to Easter. He had to endure the suffering and shame that came on the Friday we strangely call good, only because we know the eventual outcome. The terror that lurks behind this story of Palm Sunday is recognizable to us. We recognize our faces in the faces of the crowd, those who first adoringly welcome Jesus into Jerusalem, only to turn against him in a frenzy of bloodshed and violence by the end of the week. We know the way in which we recognize our saviors, falling down before them in gratitude when we believe that they will give us everything our hearts desire, and turning against them in angry resentment when they do not deliver what we expect.

And somehow it is redemptive just to see that so honestly depicted in the Bible, present in the Bible, even as it is in life. If the Bible were only about the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, it would not be our book. But the Bible is our book. It is about us - the people we are rather than the people we wish in our fantasies we were. And because the Bible is genuinely about us, it is often a terrifying book.

More than just accurately describing our terrors, the Bible depicts a God who embraces our errant ways. God does not simply name and judge our terrors; God is present in them, working our redemption in ways we are not equipped to see. The terrible events behind this week ask each of us: "Are we prepared to follow God through all the events of our lives, or just the events that meet our approval?" God does not mean simply to improve us but to radically save us, even though some of us must be brought near death for that to happen. Death lurks in the shadows throughout every event of this week.

The story of Holy Week proclaims another terrifying fact: God wills this to happen. Jesus did not begrudgingly give up his life to the forces of evil. He offered it willingly. He waded into the dark abyss of death alone, in quiet confidence that he would not be alone forever. The watershed moment of the cross pulls together the paradox of suffering and salvation, conflict and reconciliation, defeat and victory, death and resurrection, for the cross is both the instrument of death and the symbol of new life - both inseparably bound together in that one symbol of what is true about life.

The events of this coming week in our Lord's life illuminate the realities of our own human drama. Our own lives move from frustration to fulfillment, from suffering to wholeness. Without embracing one we cannot embrace the other. This is the reality of living and the message of the gospel. Our faith is not a set of ideas or a system of correct beliefs.

Our faith is based on a Life which leads us through every event possible in our lives, a Life so real and true that it touches us with power and integrity in times of despair and times of joy. If we watch that Life this week, we will see that it runs the gauntlet ahead of us so that we will know that it can be done.

The good news is that he did not flinch from the murderous mob. He did not side-step the terror or miraculously escape "a la Hollywood" into some divine world, hermetically sealed from human pain and terror. He came among us. He passed through the waving palm branches and marches with us up to death. He embraced the terror, all the terrible, terrifying, horrifying, painful ambiguity of human existence, and says, "Brothers and sisters, I love you still."

If we plan on living life in the real world, where bad things happen to good people, where a stray bullet or an out-of-control car kills the innocent, where disease strikes without warning, where people suffer for no good reason - then you'd better aim for Easter faith, because the shallow faith of Palm Sunday will fail you when the going gets tough.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we should stop celebrating Palm Sunday. It is a significant day for us as we remember the accolades of the crowd. But we should also remember some of those same people shouted "crucify" in a matter of days.

One way that we can deepen our faith and stretch it from a Palm Sunday faith to an Easter faith is by experiencing the events of Holy Week, particularly Good Friday. I realize that you may have made other plans for Friday, but I'm asking you to drop them to expand your faith from Palm Sunday to Easter. On Friday at 7, join us as we reflect upon the seven last words of Christ and experience the horrors of that day.

I realize that some would say that they don't like dwelling on the negative aspects of Holy Week - they would rather mark it only with joyous worship on Palm Sunday and Easter without any of the heartache in between. But I maintain that until we have been moved by the death of Jesus upon the cross, we will not know how far our faith will carry us through suffering and tragedy. Palm Sunday faith, fickle faith, flighty faith, fanciful faith fails the test of suffering every time. But Easter faith rises to meet every dire circumstance precisely because it has endured Good Friday. It has met the enemy, not with violence but with love.

Thirty years ago, Mr. Kenneth W. Morgan, Professor of Religion Emeritus at Colgate University, wrote the following letter to the editor of the New York Times. "Once in Damascus years ago, when I was strolling along the street called Straight - wondering whether it is truly the most ancient street in the world that has served continuously as a marketplace - I watched as a man who was riding slowly through the crowd on a bicycle with a basket of oranges precariously balanced on the handlebars was bumped by a porter so bent with a heavy burden that he had not seen him.

The burden dropped, the oranges were scattered and a bitter altercation broke out between the two men. After an angry exchange of shouted insults, as the bicyclist moved toward the porter with clenched fist, a tattered little man slipped from the crowd, took the raised fist in his hand and kissed it. A murmur of approval ran through the watchers, the antagonists relaxed, and then the people began picking up the oranges and the little man drifted away. I have remembered that as a caring act, an act of devotion there on the street called Straight by a man who might have been a Muslim, a Jew, or a Christian."

In choosing a humble way of entering Jerusalem, the headquarters for the hatred against him, Jesus kissed the fist of his enemies, even though he knew that this would not dissuade them from their determination to kill him. The momentary excitement of the crowd on Palm Sunday didn't fool or deter him from his appointed task, which was not just to talk the talk, but to walk the walk of obedience. In doing so, he paved the way for us to do likewise.

The Palm Sunday parade was just the opening act of a drama which took Jesus from exaltation to execution in one short week. He was willing to lead the procession into Jerusalem so that we might know that we don't have to go it alone in our own parade of problems. Jesus has been there and more than done that! Because he didn't flinch at the troubles that lay ahead, we can trust him to walk with us from celebration to pain to death and resurrection.

But don't be fooled by those who tell us that faith in Jesus Christ protects us from what life dishes out. Jesus wasn't fooled into thinking that the Palm Sunday faith of the crowd would support him through the rest of the week. He knew what lay ahead and still he rode on in majesty, knowing full well that the cheers would quickly turn to jeers. But he persevered nevertheless because he was walking the walk for us. He wasn't fooled and neither should we be. When the going gets tough, Jesus toughs it out for us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen**