

The Passion of Our Lord

Every year the Christian church walks the journey of Holy Week, from Palm Sunday through Easter morning. In the liturgies of the church, we not only recall the events from the past; we are called to take part in them. That is what Christians have done for almost two thousand years: to discover how these stories from Jesus' life speak to us in our own lives. That is one of the great gifts of worship: to help us see that our own, individual story is connected with this greater, universal story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

We began with the liturgy of the palms, recalling when Jesus made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. For generations, the Jewish people had been waiting and hoping for the coming of the Messiah. At the time, the Romans were in control of the land of Israel, and Roman rule was often harsh and oppressive. Then Jesus of Nazareth came along, and he taught like no one else. He cast out demons, healed the sick, and his ministry he reached out to include everyone. Many began to think that he might be the Messiah, the one God had sent to usher in a new era. Perhaps Jesus would be the one to help defeat the Romans and bring freedom and peace.

After three years of his public ministry, Jesus was well-known throughout the region. When he entered Jerusalem, riding on colt, a great crowd gathered around him and welcomed him with open arms. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" they cried. They waved branches of palms along the way, and they threw their garments down onto the ground to provide a path for him. The scriptures were being fulfilled. The new king, the Messiah had arrived, and people were ready to follow.

This morning, we did our part in the story as we gathered with branches and palms, and we formed a procession, making our way into the nave of our building. But it doesn't take long before the story turns. Like the people of Jerusalem, we go along with the crowds waving palm branches and singing praise to Jesus. And only a short while later, we join our voices with the people who shout, "Crucify him!" We are imperfect humans. We are like Peter: we state that our faith is in Jesus, and vow to stay with him no matter what. But when things turn for the worse, our faith falters and we act as if we don't this Jesus at all. One day, we are with the crowds ready for

triumph and glory; a few days later we are afraid, and we can only watch Jesus at a distance, while he is on the cross, deserted by almost everyone.

What do we do a story like this? What is its message for us? Where might we see God in this story, and in our story?

It is worth noting that the story of Christ's Passion from scripture does not try to explain why all this happened. You can read the story in any of the four gospels, but you will find no easy answers given. That is part of the power and weight of the story. The suffering is real, and so is the pain, and failure, and so is Jesus' death on the cross. The scriptures bear witness to the Passion of Jesus; they invite us into the story.

And if we have ears to listen and eyes to see, we may come to understand that Jesus' story is not just about this one person who lived 2,000 years ago. To be human is to suffer. We all know that pain and tragedy come to every life. We have all witnessed or experienced betrayal and cruelty and loss. Palm Sunday reminds us that to be human is to live with these tremendous opposites of hope and despair, triumph and defeat, joy and sorrow. We believe that in the story of Jesus, we can find meaning and hope in the tragedy and suffering that comes to our lives. As Christians, we look to Jesus. Especially in this day and this week, we look to Jesus. As the church, that is our job this week.

So, when the praise came from the crowds, Jesus didn't change who he was at all. He didn't try to become the powerful political leader that everyone wanted. He faithfully continued the way he had been going his whole life, in obedience to God. And when things turned against him, when he was betrayed by his closest friends and the leaders of own religion, when he was handed over to be beaten and crucified, when the same people who praised him then sought to destroy him – as always, he was still faithful to God. He trusted that God loved him and was always with him. When met with violence or hatred, Jesus responded with love, the way he always had. He remained true to who he was because he knew who he was in God. That is what we see in Jesus. This is the Jesus we look to and try to follow. Our Collect this morning stated that we look to Jesus as an example of great humility. This kind of humility is knowing who we are in God. Jesus knew who he was: God's own child, God's beloved. Praise from the crowd did not change that. Neither did hate and condemnation.

In Jesus, God became fully human. That means Jesus fully enters into the suffering and pain of this world. In his own body he encounters everything that comes to every human life. He doesn't explain it, or make it go away, instead, he walks its path. He struggles with it, he carries its weight as he bears the cross, he prays with it. He humbly gives himself to God through it. And down deep, in his bones and in his very body and blood, Jesus trusts that God can bring good from even this. In the end, Jesus holds it all there with his arms outstretched on the hard wood of the cross. Richard Rohr writes that the cross is a great cosmic collision of opposites: Jesus is suspended on the cross in between earth and heaven, between one direction and the other; between the triumph and the suffering; Luke's gospel describes that he is even crucified between opposite criminals, one good, and one bad. In the middle of all this, literally in the middle of all this, Jesus continues to love, and forgive, and offer himself fully to God, to his last breath.

We will all experience times of joy and celebration, and their opposites: pain, struggle, despair, tragedy, and failure. Jesus does not give us a simplistic answer why we suffer. Jesus doesn't show us a way out of our suffering, or some secret path to go around it. Instead, he shows us the harder way, the more faithful way, and that is to go through it. Jesus knows the way of suffering, and the way of the cross. Jesus calls us to follow him, knowing what our journey is like. Jesus knows the crosses we carry. And when we encounter suffering and dark days, then we – you and I – know something of the passion of Christ.

Holy Week does move to Easter. And God's final word will always be life and resurrection. But the story of our Lord's Passion asks us to enter more fully into this moment, this day, and let this story speak to us. The cross is not just the message that one day we will be in heaven where there is no more suffering. The cross shows us what Jesus did with suffering, and what we can do with our suffering – here and now. Like Jesus, we are asked walk with it. Wait with it. Feel the weight of this burden. Pray with it. Give ourselves to God through it.

We prayed in our Collect this morning: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it to be the way of life and peace. May we find the way of the cross to be way of life and peace. As we walk in the way of Christ's suffering, we also share in his resurrection. Following Jesus, we find that this is the path where God's power and presence will be made known.

May the journey from Palm Sunday to Good Friday be our meditation this week. May we keep the cross before our eyes and in our hearts. May we look to Jesus, trusting in the God that the way of the cross is the way of life. Amen.

Trace Browning

Palm Sunday, Year B

Liturgy of the Palms:

Mark 11:1-11 • Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Liturgy of the Word:

Isaiah 50:4-9a • Psalm 31:9-16 • Philippians 2:5-11 • Mark 14:1 – 15:47

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