

**The Liturgy of the Palms**

Matthew 21:1-11

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

**The Liturgy of the Word**

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Philippians 2:5-11

Psalm 31:9-16

Matthew 27:11-54

Just think. Ash Wednesday was only 5 ½ weeks ago. We were contemplating what we might like to give up...or fast from...during the season of Lent. Remember that? We were thinking about how we would prepare ourselves for Holy Week and the Resurrection. Little did we know how much we were going to be forced to give up. Being in physical contact with our family and friends was *not* one of the things we were thinking of giving up for Lent!! In some respects, these past 5 ½ weeks might as well have been 5 ½ years given all the disruption we've endured. And yet, for all the chaos and sometimes the fear; all the hopefulness and all the despair; all the bright moments and all the heartbreak; all the triumph and all the frustrations we have come to appreciate so many aspects of our lives that were 'givens' for us before the pandemic hit...things we took completely for granted. That was the beginning of the six weeks of Lent which will be over this coming Wednesday, the night before Maundy Thursday. That Thursday is the first night of what is known as the Triduum...the three days of remembering and reliving the three days before the Resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning. During this coming week, known to all Christians as Holy Week, we will cover a lot of ground and we will be riding a spiritual and emotional roller coaster until Easter morning arrives. Because of all the restrictions placed on us...for our own protection and the protection of others...we will not be able to gather together as we usually do to go through all the rituals and services and ceremonies that have come to mark our Holy Week traditions with one another. We have had to re-invent how corporate worship is experienced. It's been a challenge for all of us. How do we create something completely new without losing the sights and sounds and experiences that are so familiar and so meaningful to all of us. In these uncertain times, we are longing for what is routine and predictable. How could we not be? This is the most important and powerful week in the Christian faith. Without it, there's absolutely no reason at all to celebrate Christmas! One thing we need to remember: we are all in this together in the most important ways possible. And not only that, but God is right here in it with us. We Christians...we followers of Jesus...have surely been wondering to ourselves and each other: "Where is God in all of this?"

It would be reasonable to assume that Jesus' original followers were wondering exactly the same thing from Thursday to Sunday in that first Holy Week. Where is God in all this? Have we

been abandoned? Has Jesus been abandoned? Did we bet on the wrong horse? Is God mad at us or punishing us? This certainly doesn't look right, now does it?

No. It doesn't look right at all. And that is so very often how it is with God from the limited perspective of we human beings. The week starts off looking just great. Jesus sends a couple of his followers into Jerusalem to get a donkey and a colt, which they do. They put their cloaks on the two animals and Jesus sat on them and began the procession into Jerusalem. The crowds that flocked around him were delirious with excitement. They had just seen...or heard about...Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead...and they know with all certainty that this...this Jesus...is the long awaited Messiah. He's going to save them from the stifling oppression of the Romans. He's going to step up and sit down on David's throne and the nation of Israel will be sovereign once again and will have its king! In a town of about 40,000 people, the population of the city of Jerusalem has swelled to about 200,000...all pilgrims in town to celebrate the once a year Festival of Passover. It is the dream of every Jew to be in Jerusalem for Passover. All of them are thrilled to be there, but now the excitement has increased exponentially. They are beside themselves with excitement and joy. They're waving palm branches and singing and throwing their cloaks on the ground to make a carpet for Jesus' donkey and colt to travel on. They are shouting "Hosanna! Hosanna!" which is Aramaic for "Save (or help), I pray!" The adulation for Jesus must have been breathtaking. And it's not hard to imagine that all that love washing over Jesus had a heartwarming and positive effect on him...even as he knew how short-lived it would be.

As the peasants from the surrounding countryside were escorting Jesus into Jerusalem with great jubilation and fanfare, they were completely unaware of another procession into Jerusalem on the other side of town. They didn't know that as they were entering Jerusalem with Jesus from the Mount of Olives, Pontius Pilate and a legion of Roman soldiers were entering the city from the West. They had been summoned to Jerusalem to keep the peace during the Passover celebration. When a city swells to four times its usual number, there's bound to be trouble particularly at such an emotional time as Passover. The Romans want to be ready to quell whatever comes up and keep the peace. Thus began the collision course that would put Jesus at the very center of the struggle for power between secular forces and religious hierarchy.

As we begin to move through the scriptures in Holy Week we will be able to see the human actions that depict normal life. Among them are meal preparation, distress over the presence of evil even at a table of friends. Deception will be revealed and we will see boasting and the failure to help someone in need. We will read about an intimate friend using a kiss to signal a betrayal and we will hear about physical hurt and see desertion and witness an arrest. We will see the abuse of a beloved teacher and the denial of friendship. We will witness regret and bitter self-contempt; repentance and suicide. We will see the confusion of a political leader and hear about a prophetic and disturbing dream. We will see human beings mocking a vulnerable

and abused person. And we will be privy to the kind of collusion that rigged a process that meant a public and humiliating death for an innocent man. There's a lot of treachery going on in this story during the upcoming week. We have to ask ourselves? Where is God in all this? How could God let all of this happen? We need to also see that in Jesus, God allowed himself to be in the muck and mire with us. God's saving grace is all mixed in with our own suffering and foibles. That grace is present with us in our own distress and helplessness.

The humans in this story are full of plotting, neglect and finally killing what is good. Unless you look carefully, God, on the other hand doesn't seem to be doing too much. If you'll notice God seems to do nothing and Jesus himself barely opens his mouth even when he's asked a question or given a chance to defend himself. The humans are going about their business without divine power swooping in to rescue or transform anybody. It doesn't sound much different than what we experience today. And we have to ask ourselves now...as then: Where is God when things are not going too well? Have we been abandoned? Does God simply not care? Or is God really powerless to do anything or to intervene? The ways of God are not our ways. We can rarely see God at work in real time. But we can see God at work in the rear view mirror. That vision is always 2020. In real time, however, what's required is faith. What is required is a trust in God; a faith in God when we can't figure out how all of this is going to turn out and we can't see what God is doing.

Have faith anyway!

Just remember one thing. Both Judas and Peter loved Jesus and yet both of them betrayed Jesus...each in his own way. At the moment when faith was most severely tested and the cost of discipleship was the highest, they both failed. However, they each responded to that failure differently. Judas refused forgiveness and continued on his own path of self-destruction. Peter allowed himself to be forgiven and was given the keys to the kingdom...the foundation of the church. Their experiences remind us that at the cross there is but a thin line between faithfulness and treachery. But God's loving arms reach out to us either way.

As we move through this Palm Sunday and we experience the great joy that is Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and we are then thrown into despair listening to the circumstances that took him to the cross, remember one thing. Jesus came to us in a human body so that he could show us what God is like and he could show us how much God loves us. Apparently, God will do anything to rescue us from the muck and mire in which we find ourselves and the shackles that hold us tight.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.