

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Luke 19: 36-40 "Keep the Passion with the Palms" Rev. Janet Chapman 4/10/22

I have a great deal of respect for teachers and the hard job they have. For many, it's been even harder the past 2 years. As things go back to in person, I know that some high school and jr. high drama teachers are asking their students to attend as many plays outside of class as possible in order to grow more familiar with theatre. One high school was featuring a well-known musical for their spring production and the jr. high teacher told her students she would be going to the Thursday night performance – she would give extra credit for any student who also went and stayed for the entire thing. The following Monday she named all the students whom she spotted at the conclusion of Thursday's musical. When Sheila wasn't named, she came up to the teacher and asked why her name wasn't called. "I promise I was there," she said. The teacher responded, "Well I thought I saw you at the beginning but after the first act, I didn't see you again." Sheila responded, "Well, I wanted to stay for it all, seeing how this was the first play I ever attended, but the program said that the next act was taking place three days later." Even the best of teachers, no matter how hard they try, discover that some students will still struggle to understand.

All major religions agree that Jesus the Carpenter was a Master Teacher whose students often struggled to understand; he was like that Suffering Servant that Isaiah speaks of, "one who was given the tongue of a teacher that he may know how to sustain the weary with a word." Jesus spent 3 years teaching with flair, creativity, and impact; his teaching sustained those who had been oppressed by an evil regime and gave hope when all hope seemed lost. Then came the time for Jesus to set his face, like flint, to the trial to come as he headed back to Jerusalem, the arena of so-called justice. It would be a trial that would not just challenge his

teachings, but be fraught with misunderstandings, shame, manipulation, and vengeance. For Christian readers, Isaiah's words seem to foreshadow the story of Jesus' suffering and then pronounce judgment on those who will judge, condemn, and sentence Jesus.

Some of you know that this Sunday is known by 2 different names in Christian tradition – Palm Sunday & Passion Sunday. Most churches focus on the playful frenzy of the palms where we try to capture the mood of that triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem led by adorable children waving branches in the air... with an occasional bop on the head from a wayward palm that gets a little too overzealous. This is the mood which many of us were brought up with, kind of like a festive dress rehearsal for Easter triumph, because everybody loves a parade! This tradition comes out of that discreet form of Protestantism that could not bear the embarrassment or the indignity of the cross. Instead, we like to remember that the palm was the symbol of Roman victory, and to bear your palm was to have achieved and triumphed over your enemies.

For all its joyful hosannas, however, Palm Sunday is meant to be a day of contrasts. We see it in Jesus, as both Master Teacher and King of the universe who chooses to ride on a borrowed donkey no less. The contrast grows as the city that welcomes him will later scream for his blood. It shouldn't surprise us for we, of course, have our own contradictions. Someone tells us the best way to create peace is by initiating a war. The strong are strengthened by holding off the weak. Parents confront fear by buying a handgun for the dresser drawer. Schools encourage competition over cooperation. Governments and businesses seek to win at all costs, even if it bankrupts them. And deadly missiles are fired directly at retreating families with the vulgar words painted on them "for the children." It

doesn't get much sicker than that, unless you intend to crucify an innocent man to teach the crowds a lesson and silence even the rocks from speaking up for peace and justice. Passion Sunday is the second side of the same coin which brings to mind the solemn side of the day and its almost unbearable anguish and pathos. Here we confront the dark side of the human experience, and when we are forced to cry "Crucify, crucify" along with the biblical mob, it is painfully close.

Peter Gomes notes that these two moods, palm and passion, these two sentiments seem to be out of sync with one another for they violate the law of physics that says two objects cannot occupy the same place at the same time. Our is an emotional law of physics that says the same thing, and so we move to resolve our problem, as has been done so many times before, by simply removing the Passion from the palms; by saving the suffering for the faithful few, those moral masochists who will come to church on Maundy Thursday and on Good Friday, and thereby leave today "free" for the triumphant party. Palm Sunday "addicts" like the procession, like the anticipated glory of Jesus, and they love the sense that the Lenten somber reflections imposed these last 6 weeks have at least risen if not fully departed. The problem is that when we only bear these palms, ultimately, it is not a symbol of victory but of the vanity of human foolishness, the illusion of what passes for victory in this world. The branches of palm, while rotting and getting dry as they do throughout the year, ought to remind us of both vanity and of modesty: the vanity of what we think we can do and the modesty of what we actually can do, or of what we don't do. These palms are not signs of triumph nor are they moral merit badges; they are signs of suffering, the suffering of the Savior, the suffering of his people, the suffering of all creation, and the suffering of us with it.

So in order to resolve our dilemma, we are tempted to want to interfere and make it all come out right, sooner rather than later. We may be tempted to do what the Victorians did to Shakespeare's tragedies. In their optimistic moralism, they couldn't allow Shakespeare's corrupted sense of reality to have the last word and influence young and innocent minds, so they changed the grim endings of Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, Hamlet and so on. It was sort of like what we do when school boards ban books and teachers from educating students about the reality of good families with two moms or two dads. The Victorians' version of Romeo and Juliet has the lovers suddenly recovering, and not only do they recover but they are reconciled, and so are their families, and they all live happily ever after. Now our impulse may be a bit more sophisticated than theirs; we may not be drawn to "dress up" the Passion and turn it into something fit for prime time, with an upbeat, happy ending like Mel Brooks' "The Producers," with that wonderful kick-line song about Nazi Germany, "Springtime for Hitler." But we may, however, want to interfere and avoid what we know is going to happen. We want to make it all come out right in our own eyes, which usually means doing nothing: no suffering, no Passion, no ambiguity, no pain, and as the saying goes, "no gain."

Instead, possibly there is another way, the way of Jesus. In a world where bombs come addressed "to the children," the only thing that brings reconciliation and hope is the unaltering and transforming love of God. God's love doesn't do away with conflict, or suffering, or tragedy; the cross should teach us that. God's love doesn't do away with it, but God's love makes it possible to bear the unbearable. God's love makes it possible to see the suffering of our brothers and sisters, to share in it, to understand it, and to pass through it. God's love opens doors for you and I to respond with **com**-passion, which literally means with passion,

with pathos. God's love prods us to remind those who suffer that they are not alone, as we give assistance to meet their needs. It is the only thing that stands between utter chaos or insanity and an attempt to stand whole and full and complete in the middle of ambiguity, the questions of why, and the incessant tragedies. God's love is what makes it possible for people to stand today saying "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven," when peace is nowhere to be seen. And when the naysayers complain about all this talk of God's love and the suffering of Jesus, we can rest assured that even if we are silenced, the stones themselves will shout out for peace to come, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, Amen.