

The Liturgy of the Palms

Mark 11:1-11

or John 12:12-16

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

The Liturgy of the Word

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Philippians 2:5-11

Mark 14:1-15:47

or Mark 15:1-39, [40-47]

Psalm 31:9-16

There are two occasions in the liturgical year when we do a good bit of moving around in our service. One is during Advent when the clergy and choir process around the sanctuary at the beginning of each of the Sundays in Advent singing to the congregation, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." The other is on Palm Sunday. This service actually begins outside the church building. We bless the palms and then wave them and sing as we process into the building reminiscent of Jesus entering Jerusalem. We have not been able to do either of these services in our customary way during the last year as we are still being held captive by a worldwide pandemic. We pray for our safe liberation soon!

So many of us...even those who do not profess to be Christians...know the story of Holy Week. It is the culmination of Jesus' ministry and mission on earth...and the events of the week take us all on an unscheduled, unexpected and turbulent emotional roller coaster ride. This one week covers all the human emotions we ever feel...adulation, expectation, joy, relief, triumph, hope, wonder, curiosity, betrayal, disappointment, confusion, terror, grief, horror, sadness, fear...and so much more. Even as we can see God's hand weaving through all the events of this week, it's sometimes hard to continue to believe in God's presence. There are moments when we don't. But we know God was present for all of it...just as God is present for all the events of our lives.

It's hard to believe that the season of Lent...which leads us to Holy Week...began just 5 ½ short weeks ago. The Christian custom is to give something up for Lent...or perhaps add something to our daily routine...the purpose being to improve our relationship with God and our connection to Jesus and our awareness of the Holy Spirit. These forty days of Lent are a frail reconstruction of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness doing battle with Satan. Somehow, abstaining from a favorite food or giving up a pleasurable pastime doesn't quite evoke the same kind of emotional struggle that Jesus had with Satan himself, but it is a nod in that direction... particularly if we've taken the routine seriously and find ourselves struggling mightily with

temptation. But this Wednesday we will come to the end of that season because now we are entering into Holy Week.

To set the stage for these events, it's important to know all the varying factors that went into the culmination of this week. Jesus has been preaching and teaching and performing miracles all through the countryside for the past three years. On more than one occasion he has verbally jostled with the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Temple and religious hierarchy. He has challenged them in their misuse of the commandments of God and their unjust and treacherous dealings with the rank and file among the Jewish people. He's called them out. And they are not fond of him. They keep trying to trap him into saying something that will condemn him with his own words. But they are not successful.

In many instances, the religious leaders are actually complicit with the Roman occupiers who keep Israel under their political and economic thumb. These religious leaders, in Jesus' assessment, are not taking care of the people. They're taking care of themselves. Consequently, they are anxious to silence Jesus or get rid of him altogether. He's making trouble for them and they want him out of the way. Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem has caused quite a stir and is alarming to the powers that be. Jesus is obviously very popular and has power of his own. As the jubilant people wave their branches and palms and make a carpet for Jesus with their cloaks, they are unaware that on the opposite side of town, Pilate is also entering Jerusalem with a legion of Roman soldiers standing at the ready to quell any disruption or outbreak of violence or uprising that might occur. The little town of Jerusalem has swelled to four times its normal size to accommodate all the Jewish pilgrims who have flocked to the city for Passover. The need for crowd control is not only possible; it's likely.

Just to ramp things up a bit, the crowds following Jesus and strewing palms in his path are on an emotional high since learning that Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead in the little town of Bethany just two miles away. That latest event has convinced them that Jesus is their long-awaited Messiah. He's going to assume David's throne and rule over all of Israel. He's going to liberate them from cruel and oppressive Roman rule in the same way Moses led them out of captivity in Egypt. For them, it's a modern-day exodus recreated. And the timing is perfect. All the Jews flocking to Jerusalem are there to celebrate their release from captivity in Egypt in the Feast of the Passover. It was tangible proof of God's covenant with them and of God's saving grace. They just know it's going to happen again and they will be liberated from oppressive Roman rule. The crowd is ecstatic. The religious leaders are nervous. Jesus is tipping the balance of the status quo.

So what happened? How did the tables turn so fast? Jesus pays little attention to all the adulation falling on him as he enters Jerusalem. He knows how this is going to turn out. He knows what his mission is. He knows all the things that will happen at the end of the week. The night before he is arrested, he explains to his disciples how he wants to be remembered. That's when he institutes the Holy Eucharist. They think they are gathered in the upstairs room to enjoy a meal together and to plan the takeover of the Temple. They think they're going to have a war council to help Jesus come to power. As is so often the case with Jesus and the disciples, they don't understand what has happened; what is happening; and what is about to happen. But Jesus does.

Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead has sealed his fate with the Temple Hierarchy and the religious leaders are intent on having Jesus executed. They can't execute anyone themselves, so they must appeal to the Romans to do it for them. Since the Jewish custom is to release one condemned man at Passover, there's always the chance that this crowd, that has been so taken with Jesus, will call for *his* release. With a few well planted and loud protesters in the crowd calling for "Barabbas" those intent on seeing Jesus executed will have their way. It's always a wonder how a crowd that was so enthusiastic about Jesus on Sunday, could call for his execution on Friday. What happened? Well, if any of you have ever been in a boisterous crowd with a few well-chosen and loud leaders calling the shots, you know how quickly the tide can turn. We human beings are, indeed, much like sheep. We follow the leader. If you've never seen mob rule, we were all reminded on January 6 of this year what that sort of scene looks like and how quickly it can get out of control. If you can imagine such a thing happening to the crowd watching the spectacle of Jesus' trial, then you know exactly how it was that he came to be crucified.

He went like a lamb to the slaughter...the paschal lamb. He didn't defend himself. He didn't fight back. He didn't flee. He didn't avoid. He didn't argue. He didn't plead for mercy. He didn't protest the injustice. He didn't make his case. In short, he didn't engage with evil on evil's terms. And consequently, evil did not overtake him. Evil did all that it could to eradicate him and his response was to refuse to be provoked. And he wasn't eradicated at all.

We began this day with great joy...with our own palms waving in the air with nothing but pure joy because we knew that our savior had arrived. During this week ahead, as we walk through this Holy Week together, may we pause each day to walk this walk with Jesus. May we be prayerful as we go through each day knowing how Jesus paved the way for our salvation throughout his ministry, but most importantly during this most Holy Week.

We know that Easter is coming, but we can't get to Easter without going through Holy Week. As we move through this Holy Week, let's take it one day at a time. If you have never attended Holy Week services this may be the year to try it. Evening Prayer is offered on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. There's also a Maundy Thursday service, a Good Friday service, and an Easter Vigil service on Saturday. Take advantage of each one of them...always at 7:00pm and on ZOOM. More than one person has confessed to me that attending all the Holy Week services had a profound impact in terms of celebrating on Easter morning!

During this Holy Week may we glean from each day all we need spiritually and emotionally to be able to arrive at the unspeakable joy of the Easter morning resurrection with new insight, new appreciation for the gift given to us and new hope for the future that lies ahead of us...knowing that God is always with us in all things.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.