

Sermon, Palm Sunday, Year B

March 25, 2018

“Pour your grace into our hearts, O Lord, that we who have known the incarnation of your Son Jesus Christ, announced by an angel to the Virgin Mary, may by his cross and passion be brought to the glory of his resurrection; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.” [Collect for the Annunciation]

We are part of a liturgical church, the Episcopal Church. We follow ancient Catholic religious practices that have their roots in Judaism—both traditions are deeply liturgical. What that means is that we do things like we have done this morning—having processions in which we all participates; and reenacting significant parts of salvation history, like Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and his Passion and Death; and connecting these outward acts with our inner faith so that we may be transformed in how we experience our faith and live it in the liturgy of daily life.

Another part of being a liturgical church is following a special calendar for the seasons of the church year. For those of us raised in the Episcopal Church or some similar church, we may not even think about it—seasons like Lent or special holy days like Ash Wednesday are ingrained in our way of practicing our faith. For some from other traditions or with no particular religious background, special days may seem strange to us—strange, wonderful or just simply strange.

This day—Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday—is probably the most intense day liturgically and emotionally in our church calendar. Every year, it is the way we begin Holy Week. Like many preachers over several years, I have pointed out the extreme contrast between how the day begins—with celebratory singing and the waving of palm branches; and how it ends—with us repeating the story of how Jesus was betrayed and crucified.

Today has another layer of meaning—it is March 25, another feast day; though we delay celebrating it officially until after Easter Week this year. March 25 is the feast of the Annunciation, when we remember the Archangel Gabriel coming to visit Mary to announce that she would be with child. Mary’s faith enabled the miracle of the Incarnation, God becoming human in Jesus. When Gabriel gave the unbelievable news, Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Her spirit, her response, is the model of faith for all Christians.

Mary would come to know that her son would be a different type of messiah; an unexpected revelation of the Son of God who would bring salvation of the world. Her son’s destiny is most clearly revealed when she and Joseph presented the infant Jesus in the temple to be dedicated to the Lord.

A holy man named Simon, led by the Holy Spirit, approached them and identified this baby as the long expected Messiah. As Simon held the baby in his arms, he “blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’” From this beginning, it was predicted Jesus’ life would be different culminate in his rejection, suffering, and death.

This is not what the people of God were expecting. The people of Israel had been waiting for centuries for a Messiah to restore the past glories of Israel under David and Solomon; and people all around the world hoped for a Savior who would set things right for them and bring peace. Jews and Gentiles expected their hope would come from a strong ruler with a mighty army. No one expected God’s answer: a baby born in poverty under strange circumstances and that would grow into the man we remember today—one rejected, tortured, and crucified.

Some of the Hebrew prophets (especially Isaiah that we heard in part today) foretold this type of unexpected Savior. Understandably, these were predictions that many might ignore or deny. It did not fit what they wanted. God alone knew that what was so deeply wrong with the world required a special type of savior who would bring the healing we needed to be made whole.

So what is wrong with the world—with us? And how did the one “born to die” bring the needed cure for us? The central problem with us is identified in the stories from the first chapters of Genesis: our main problem is our alienation from God and from one another; and how this alienation so often leads to violence. That’s it. If we break down the long list of all the different human sins, the root issues are our alienation and violence.

That is why we needed a certain type of Savior who would save us in an unexpected way. If God had sent someone like we expected—a powerful ruler with a great army that would slay those we thought of as enemies—that would simply add to the alienation and violence that exists in our world. That way would contradict and undermine God’s deepest desire for us-- to live in peace and with love for one another. So God came to us in a different way.

The stories of the Gospels and all of the New Testament point to that radically different way in the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. His teaching and healing would give hope to people who were ill and hopeless on the margins of society. He broke revered rules—for example, doing the work of healing on the Sabbath; and associating with notorious sinners over the objections of religious leaders.

All that he exemplified in his life would reveal what God wanted for humanity—a community of kindness that would care for people who needed help; a community committed to respecting the dignity of all people so that they could flourish in God’s reign of justice and mercy.

Not everyone appreciated this different way that Jesus proclaimed and lived. His primary opponents were the politically and religiously powerful of his day. The goodness of his heart, the kindness of his actions, and his commitment to telling the truth would make these leaders feel threatened so that they would attack him and prevent him from undermining their positions of power.

The Passion narrative we just heard describes their plot and how they justified their violence. Jesus' responded with a sense of divine destiny—he knew his suffering and death were part of God's way to bring healing and wholeness to the world. So he was willing to endure what he knew was before him. His life and his death would bring to light the core human problems of alienation and violence.

And Jesus' death also brought healing. By not returning violence for violence, Jesus pioneered this new way to live. When Jesus was betrayed by friends, he forgave. When he was accused by enemies, he remained silent. When he was struck by soldiers, he did not strike back. Even from the cross, Jesus understood us and what it means to be human. He said, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do." And his final cry came from the Psalms, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

By not striking back and adding to the endless cycle of alienation and violence that oppresses and terrorizes humanity, Jesus revealed God's different way of living. Instead of blaming others for what's wrong in the world; or attacking those from whom we are alienated and using violence to show strength, Jesus showed that God's love is more powerful than our misguided human attempts to use power to make things right. God's love is the only anecdote for our sin.

So as we remember the Passion story in our church liturgy today, how do we take it with us into the liturgy of daily life? There are three things that I can offer to you for your prayerful reflection with the hope that God's grace make them real to you:

1. **The problems we face as human beings are bigger than us.** We are stuck in our sin. Our leaders—not only our current political leaders, but all leaders—are unable to help us. They are stuck in sin, too. That doesn't mean we give up. We must still seek justice and practice compassion in our world. But knowing the size of our problems gives us perspective. We cannot make things right on our own.
2. **We need God.** We need divine intervention to save us from ourselves. Instead of becoming hopeless or distressed, our stuckness is a reminder that we need God—a person, a force, a power greater than us that both understands the human problem and can help us find the way out.
3. **God has answered that deepest human need.** The story of Jesus—from the Annunciation of his birth to Mary to the Passion story we read today—reveals that in Jesus God became one

of us. Jesus understands what it means to be human from the inside. And as God, Jesus understands what we need from the outside to overcome our vicious cycle of sin, alienation, and violence.

As we remember these three things this Holy Week, may we all cry out to God and trust God for our healing. Not only healing for us as individuals, but healing for our families, our neighbors, our nation-- healing even for our enemies.

That cry from our heart is in harmony with God's deepest desire for us as human beings. God's way of love is what Jesus showed us; and if we trust in Jesus, God gives us the power to follow that way of love and live. If we do, by God's grace, we can be part of God's healing in this world. Amen.