

The Liturgy of the Palms

Mark 11:1-11

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

The Liturgy of the Word

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Philippians 2:5-11

Mark 14:1-15:47

Psalm 31:9-16

We woke up last Wednesday to snow on the ground and it snowed all day. A snow day is like a little mini-vacation for all of us when we are given time we didn't think we were going to get to do things we hadn't planned to do. It's a respite. A time when the world gets still and normal routines are disrupted. Knowing that I would have a relatively leisurely day, I took the time to watch a morning TV show which is something I rarely do. I had never seen this particular show before and will probably never watch it again, but on this snowy morning the person being interviewed is the creator of a new Netflix series called "The Push." It's a study in social psychology and it explores the forces that can manipulate an ordinary person into committing the uncommon and horrendous act of murder. The experimenters wanted to find out if such a manipulation was possible and, if so, how could it be done? The entire experiment is based on what we know about peer pressure, social psychology and our human instinct to want to 'fit in' with those around us...at almost any cost. The interview didn't reveal the outcome of the experiment, but the premise is fascinating. And I couldn't help but think of the gospel reading we just heard in the Passion Play this morning. The circumstances of life change through the ages, but human nature remains the same. We are all capable of doing an about face.

We've just heard the story from Mark's gospel about the last week of Jesus' life and our service this morning reflects the dramatic change from Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem with his disciples to celebrate the Passover to the brutal torture and death of Jesus before week's end. The convergence of the end of Jesus' life on earth during this most Holy Week in the Jewish faith is no accident. God's timing, as we know, is always perfect.

We started the service with a joyful expression of Jesus' and God's glory by waving palm branches and singing God's praises. We re-enact Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. His followers expect that Jesus is going to be the liberator of the Jewish people from Roman rule and oppression in the same way Moses liberated them from Egyptian slavery. The Feast of the Passover is the Jewish commemoration of that great event in the history of Israel. And Jesus'

followers are expecting a repeat performance on a grander scale. But before the end of our service today, we will be crying “Crucify him!” just as the crowd in Jerusalem did.

Just before Jesus and his followers go to Jerusalem, Jesus performs probably the most dramatic of his miracles...raising Lazarus from the dead in the little village of Bethany which is a bedroom community for Jerusalem. It's only about three miles away. Lazarus has been dead for four days when Jesus finally shows up, so there is no doubt in anyone's mind that Lazarus is dead. And there, before his disciples and Lazarus' family and a crowd of followers, Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb and he appears. It's a spectacular display of the power of God through Jesus. No one can dispute the glory of that moment. His disciples and his followers are awe-struck and as they enter Jerusalem a few days later, they are still riding on a high.

When Jesus and his disciples and the crowd enter Jerusalem it is with an overwhelming sense of hope and triumph. Anyone who can reverse the final destruction of a man through death can surely save the Jewish people from their Roman oppressors. Word spreads like wildfire and the people of Jerusalem push and shove and scream and shout to get closer to Jesus. He's a rock star!!! They are exuberant like they haven't been for centuries. This is it! This is the moment of their liberation. This is going to be more spectacular in their history than their liberation from slavery in Egypt. No Jew in Jerusalem at the time could contain himself. We're free!! Or so they thought!

As the week unfolds, things begin to fall apart. Jesus seems to be the only one who knows what's going to happen despite the fact that he has told his disciples on many occasions what will happen to him. Like all of us, upon hearing bad news, they are in denial. Peter has already rebuked Jesus for saying such negative things...and Jesus rebuked him right back...calling Peter, Satan, for tempting him to abandon his mission and save himself from the fate that awaits him in following the will of God.

Jesus knows what's going to happen and he very carefully prepares his disciples. He turns the last meal he is to have with them into a mandate of how he is to be remembered after his death. He establishes the sacrament of the Last Supper, our Holy Eucharist, just a few hours before the nightmare completely unfolds. Jesus is thoughtful and deliberate in his actions. He reveals that one person in the trusted band of disciples is going to betray him, but no one wants to believe it. They are still in denial. Didn't they just have the most triumphant and joyful entrance into Jerusalem? Doesn't Jesus know that he's the rightful king of Israel? Aren't they all convinced by now that Jesus is, in fact, the long-awaited Messiah? Isn't this quiet dinner they are sharing supposed to be a war council where they make plans with Jesus about how to take

over the city and assume control of the Temple? The disciples must have been truly confused by all that Jesus is saying. It could not possibly have made any sense to them.

When they wander into the Garden at Gethsemane after dinner, no one but Jesus has come to pray. No one knows the agony Jesus is already suffering in anticipating what's going to happen. Jesus is disturbed and agitated, but the disciples have no idea why. They've just eaten a big meal. They're still waiting for the war plan to unfold. And when Jesus gets quiet and begins to pray, they fall asleep still thinking that all is well. They have no idea what's happening.

When the soldiers arrive to arrest Jesus, they finally know who the betrayer is. Judas kisses Jesus on the cheek and the soldiers and the angry crowd with them arrest Jesus. They take him to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council. The Council can't get the testimonies against him to match, so they finally ask Jesus himself if he's the Messiah. And he answers, "I am." If you remember, those are the words that God uses with Moses to identify himself. "I am." Jesus does nothing to defend himself. He even chastises one of his followers for pulling out a sword and lopping off a slave's ear. No violence from Jesus. No struggle to get away. No denial of the charges brought against him. The interrogation by the Sanhedrin is bad enough, but when they turn him over to the Romans, things get brutal.

Pilate questions Jesus in public, but Jesus says little. Pilate offers to release him to the crowd as is the custom during the Passover Week. The Romans will release one of the Jewish political prisoners...one of the ones who has stirred up insurrection against Rome...if the people but shout the name of the one they want. But they don't shout the name of Jesus. They are disappointed and angry and disillusioned that Jesus has fallen so quickly and seems to have lost all his power. What's wrong with him? They shout instead for Barabbas, a man of questionable character who has a history of inciting riots against Rome. Suddenly, he becomes the hope of the crowd instead of Jesus. Ironically, Barabbas' name when translated means, "Son of God." The word 'bar' means 'son of' and 'abba' is the name Jesus has told his followers to use when praying to God. It is the colloquial in Hebrew of 'Daddy.'

The release of Barabbas is the ultimate injustice. Still Jesus does nothing to stop it or even to protest. He endures the beating, the torture, the mocking, the humiliation. He behaves like a lamb to the slaughter. He is the Passover Lamb, but of a new covenant that God is making with his people. No one but Jesus understands any of this. He is quite alone. As he predicted, all his followers either deny him or flee or both. They are scattered like frightened sheep who have been spooked. The same people who cheered the loudest for Jesus at the beginning of the week are the very ones who run away or call for his crucifixion. The tide has turned against Jesus and his followers roll with the tide...in the midst of their confusion and disappointment.

Perhaps because of the awful beating that Jesus endured, he lasted only six hours on the cross. He was half dead before he was lifted up for crucifixion. But even there, the taunting continued. The temptation continued. And he cries out at the end a bitter cry of abandonment: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It is a cry that resonates with each of us who have ever been in deep pain and have appealed to God to save us from disaster. We all know what that sense of abandonment can feel like. We have all lived through heartbreak and disaster that we do not understand and we wonder where God is. We wonder why and how God could let this happen. We are confused and disappointed and we feel abandoned.

It is striking that when the curtain in the Temple tears from top to bottom at the moment of Jesus' death, the barrier between man and God has been destroyed and God is on the loose in our world. It is the centurion who proclaims that Jesus is, in fact, the Son of God. In Jesus' death, the centurion gets it. This is a man charged with enforcing and ensuring the Pax Romana...the Peace of Rome. Suddenly, he realizes that the Pax Romana that must be maintained by force and coercion and even violence is no real peace at all. It may be law and order, but it is not peace.

It's not hard to begin to think about our own desire for peace in this world. Yesterday hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children marched in Washington, DC and at other locations in this country and around the world to protest gun violence. Their plea is that legislators do something about curbing the violence. They want peace and safety. *We all* want peace and safety. But perhaps the legislators are not the only ones who are going to provide it for us. Perhaps it falls to the religious leaders and to the faithful...of all faiths...in this country and all over the world to spread the word about the Peace of God, not the Pax Romana.

Perhaps we who are followers of Jesus Christ should not scatter like lost sheep and deny the Savior that we profess to follow. Perhaps we should be thinking about all that Jesus taught us about loving one another, about building community, about inclusion of all those left on the margins. Perhaps we need to look within ourselves and to the God we love for the answers and solutions that we seek.

Violence only begets more violence. Even the Roman Centurion realized that as he gazed at Jesus hanging on the cross. The Temple curtain has torn from top to bottom. The barrier between humanity and God has been removed. God is on the loose among us. God turned the views of the Centurion, the executioner, around and transformed him. God can do the same for us today. Jesus is still the light. Jesus remains The Way.

Thanks to Jesus' willingness to remain faithful to the will of God, God remains on the loose among us. The same internal forces that coerce us into behaving in ways that are foreign to us can be the same coercive forces that propel us into helping to usher in the kingdom of God...one person at a time. We are all capable of doing an about face. We seek the peace of God. That's the real peace. Because of Jesus, God remains among us. Jesus Christ was not abandoned by God and neither are we. All we need to do is call upon his name.

And with God, we know, all things are possible.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.