

Psalm 118:1-4, 19-29
Palm/Passion Sunday

Luke 19:28-48

April 14, 2019

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE PASSION AND THE PALMS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In the late fall of 1963, President John F. Kennedy had not yet formally announced his bid for re-election. However, he and his advisers had already begun making plans for the campaign and the President thought he had a good chance of winning a second term in November 1964. Kennedy knew it was crucial to his re-election to carry the state of Texas, so he made plans to travel to Dallas, despite warnings of the danger he might face. Prior to his late November visit, full page ads ran in Dallas papers, criticizing the President for his liberal views and his softness on Communism.

On Friday, November 22, 1963, the presidential motorcade made a sharp left turn onto Elm Street. Governor and First Lady John and Nellie Connally were seated in front of the President and First Lady. Shortly after the parade passed by the Texas School Book Depository, Nellie Connally turned in her seat and said, "Mr. President, you can't say Dallas doesn't love you." Then she heard three rifle shots and saw the President grab his throat. When she turned around in her seat, she realized her husband had also been shot in the back.

On his way from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south, Jesus was warned against going to Jerusalem. In Luke 13, we read, "At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' Jesus said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'"

On Palm Sunday, at the beginning of Holy Week, Jesus rode a donkey at the head of a parade, down the Mount of Olives and up to Jerusalem. Luke reports, "As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!'" One of Jesus' disciples could have turned to him and said, "Master, you can't say that Jerusalem doesn't love you!" The cross didn't happen immediately, but it was only five days away.

On this Palm Sunday, we have heard the children singing, seen palm branches waving, and joined our voices in singing, "Hosanna, Loud Hosanna!" Interestingly enough, Luke's story of "Palm" Sunday doesn't mention palm branches. For that matter, the story doesn't say anything about any kind of branches. Instead, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. Neither does Luke's story mention the children

singing in the pillared court and temple. Instead, it is the “whole multitude of the disciples” who began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice. But not everyone was so overjoyed at the Palm Sunday parade. Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” That’s a genteel translation of “Tell ‘em to shut up!”

On the church calendar, today is designated as Palm/Passion Sunday. When you hear the word “passion,” you might think of this dictionary definition: “strong and barely controllable emotion; a state or outburst of strong emotion; and an intense desire or enthusiasm for something.” Our English word “passion” is derived from the Latin word for “suffer.” That’s why the suffering and death of Jesus is referred to as “the Passion of Christ.” As we wave our palm branches and sing Hosanna on Palm Sunday, we need to keep in mind the passion of Christ.

According to the Presbyterian Mission website, “The question is frequently asked, Why combine the passion and the palms? The most important reason for combining the passion and the palms is the relationship between the death and resurrection of Jesus. To understand the resurrection, we must contemplate the passion of Jesus. Long, careful meditation upon the mystery of the cross must precede the glorious message of Easter. The eight-day week from Passion/Palm Sunday to Easter Day is framed by resurrection and death on one side, and death and resurrection on the other. The need to affirm, as Holy Week begins, the inseparable relationship between the death and the resurrection of Jesus is precisely the reason the passion of Christ and the palms are linked together as Passion/Palm Sunday.”¹

The passion and the palms are evident in today’s worship service. We gathered with songs of Hosanna! Loud Hosanna! The little children sang Hosanna, glory to the King, let your praises ring! We’re going to go out from here singing All glory, laud, and honor to thee, Redeemer, King, to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring.

But, woven into the fabric of our Palm Sunday celebration with palms and hosannas is the passion of Christ. We confessed that our wills are as rebellious as Jerusalem’s, that our faith is often more show than substance, and that our hearts are in need of cleansing. We just sang about the sacred head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down and, again, confessed “what thou, my Lord, has suffered was all for sinners’ gain: mine, mine was the transgression, but thine the deadly pain.” As the offering is being taken up, the handbell choir will play a meditative arrangement of the hymn “Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross.” The third verse of the hymn says, “Near the cross! O Lamb of God, Bring its scenes before me; Help me walk from day to day, With its shadow o’er me.” Even in the glorious final hymn we remember that “To thee, before thy passion, they sang their hymns of praise; to thee, now high exalted, our melody we raise.”

We might think the passion of Christ happened only on Friday, when he was nailed to the cross. But that would be a very narrow understanding of what Jesus went through during the final week of his life. Luke tells us “As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.’” (Luke 19:41-42)

This may not be the exact beginning point of the passion of Christ in Holy Week, but it's a good starting point. Weeping is more than just shedding a few tears. When Jesus wept over the city, he was expressing his grief and sorrow. It's not saying too much to suggest that Jesus was, in fact, mourning over Jerusalem. That must have pierced his soul.

In his blog called "The Things That Make for Peace," Frederick Buechner writes, "Despair and hope. They travel the road to Jerusalem together, as together they travel every road we take — despair at what in our madness we are bringing down on our own heads and hope in him who travels that road with us and for us and who is the only one of us all who is not mad. Hope in the King who approaches every human heart like a city. And it is a very great hope as hopes go and well worth all our singing and dancing and sad little palms because not even death can prevail against this King and not even the end of the world, when end it does, will be the end of him and of the mystery and majesty of his love. Blessed be he."²

Many years ago, in an adult Sunday School class at a church in Richmond, we were talking about the events of Holy Week, including Jesus' death on the cross. One woman spoke up and said, "I think Jesus' crucifixion probably wasn't as bad as we think, because he already knew he was going to be raised from the dead." I remember thinking, "Did you really just say that?" However, over the years, I have come to realize that the woman was putting into words what many of us might want to think, because the events of Holy Week — including the passion and the palms — are just too painful to think about. But, as one of our seminary professors used to say, "To get to Easter Sunday, you have to go through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday."

Three years ago in March 2016, Ann Weems died from complications from a brain tumor. According to her obituary, she "was a noted writer, speaker, liturgist, and worship leader." She was the daughter and wife of Presbyterian ministers, and has been called "the Presbyterian poet laureate." One of her seven published books of poems meant to be used in worship is called *Kneeling in Jerusalem*.

On this Passion/Palm Sunday, I'd like to share some of Ann Weems' poems from *Kneeling in Jerusalem*. The first is called "The Way to Jerusalem is Cluttered."

*The way to Jerusalem
is cluttered
with bits and pieces of our lives
that fly up and cry out,
wounding us as we try
to keep upon this path
that leads to Life.
Why didn't somebody tell us
that it would be so hard?
In the midst of the clutter,
the children laugh
and run after stars.*

*Those of us who are wise
will follow,
for the children will be the first
to kneel in Jerusalem.*

The second poem is a bit longer. In these verses, Ann Weems describes the mixed bag that is Palm Sunday and Holy Week. It is called “From Hosanna to Horror, the Only Road to Easter.”

*Balloons maybe.
If Jesus were coming here,
maybe we'd line up on either side of his parade route,
and wave balloons as he passed.
Back and forth . . . a multitude of colors,
and we'd probably shout Yea! instead of Hosanna,
and we'd hold up homemade posters saying,
“Welcome, Jesus!” and as he passed by . . .
probably in one of those bubble-top cars
because the FBI would not want to be left out of this one . . .
On the other hand maybe he'd refuse and ride that
donkey after all
or maybe even walk down the middle of the road with
balloons bobbing
as he walked, he'd wave to us and bless us.
And we'd follow, and follow and follow.
What a celebration! What a Festival of Faith
that would be!
And when the parade passed by, we'd finally go home,
and look forward to the celebration next Sunday.*

*But what about Holy Week?
The days lengthen, the pear tree flowers white
outside my kitchen window . . .
In the mysterious Lenten mix of lament and hope
the taunting, blood splattered
face of war screams into our lives,
and we are tempted to despair.
The TV bleeds and explodes
and the unspeakably obscene
inhumanity of war
blares into our ears and our hearts —
and we turn and run.*

*Into a wall —
the same wall we visit each Lent —
trying to get around a Gate called Truth,
trying to go from Palm Sunday
straight to Easter morning,
trying to keep from going into that courtyard
where we must answer whether we know him or not,
trying to keep from going anywhere near that cross.
So give us the palms and give us a parade,
but O God, whisk us right from Palm Sunday
to that “great getting-up morning.”
Have our Easter baskets filled and waiting for us, O God,
because this year we’re tired and we’re scared
and we just want a little peace and quiet.
And so we turn and run
or we kneel and pray for mercy and for miracles
and the eyes to see this Jesus
named Emmanuel,
the eyes to see that God is with us.*

A few years ago, someone said to me, “The music at the Good Friday service is so sad and depressing.” Well, I suppose it can be, especially compared to the “Hosanna, Loud Hosanna!” of Palm Sunday and the “Jesus Christ is Risen Today!” of Easter Sunday. But they all come as a package deal, even when we don’t want to admit it, and try to get from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday as quickly as we can, detouring around all of the events of Monday - Saturday.

So, during this Holy Week, as the Hosannas are still ringing in your ears, I encourage you to pick up your Bibles and read one or more of the gospel stories about Jesus’ final week. The fact that Mark devotes 37.5% of his gospel to this one week, Matthew 28.5%, Luke 23%, and John a whopping 47.6% ought to tell us how important this Holy Week is for our lives, beginning today with the passion and the palms. Make your plans to worship on Friday night and come to the Lord’s table to share communion with him and his people, and to contemplate God’s wondrous love in Jesus Christ. Then plan to celebrate and sing Alleluia, He is Risen! at the top of your lungs next Sunday. In between the two Sundays, think on how we welcome the one who comes in the name of the Lord, not just during Holy Week, but every day of our lives.

I leave you with one more Ann Weems poem from *Kneeling in Jerusalem*.

*We’re good at planning!
Give us a task force
and a project
and we’re off and running!
No trouble at all!*

*Going to the village and finding the colt,
even negotiating with the owners
is right down our alley.
And how we love a parade!
In a frenzy of celebration
we gladly focus on Jesus
and generously throw our coats
and palms in his path.
And we can shout praise
loudly enough
to make the Pharisees complain.
It's all so good!
It's between parades that
we don't do so well.
From Sunday to Sunday
we forget our hosannas.
Between parades
the stones will have to shout
because we don't.*

I have chosen a prayer written by Joanna Harader that she posted on her Spacious Faith blog. Let us pray:

***God of the foolish cross,
tottering down the streets of Jerusalem on a donkey,
You are not the savior we expect.
Your power doesn't look like the power we want from God to demonstrate.
Your wisdom makes no sense to us.
We are happy to join the crowd, waving branches,
But not so sure we want to follow you
into the temple courts
into the upper room
into the Garden of Gethsemane
to the foot of the cross.
Forgive our false assumptions.
Clarify our clouded vision.
Let us relax into the foolishness of your love, your grace.
Hosanna, hosanna
Save us, we beseech you!
Amen.***

NOTES

¹ “Passion/Palm Sunday,” at www.presbyterianmission.org.

²Frederick Buechner, “The Things That Make for Peace,” March 14, 2016 at www.frederickbuechner.com/blog