

Sunday Sermon
January 21, 2018
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
Mark 11:1-11
“Palms and Passion”

Introduction

For three years when our children were young, we saved money toward a dream vacation trip to Disney World. We had never been.

Finally, toward the end of the third summer, we figured out that we could actually do it. We loaded the car and headed south toward Florida. It seemed that the kids sat on the edge of their seats with their eyes wide open the entire trip, through four states and two days of driving.

When we finally got there, it was nighttime; and we could see the lights of the Magic Kingdom off the interstate over in the distance. We drove the long boulevard, parked the car, and got in the procession of people headed toward the shuttle.

Then we followed a line of people through the ticket booths to make the big purchase. Then it was to the monorail, the white streamlined train that would take us into the park. And it seemed that with each step of the process, the crowd and the excitement grew.

Finally, the monorail stopped and let us out on Main Street in Fantasyland. We were standing there wide-eyed in the shadow of Cinderella’s castle when the lights went dim, and the workers came down the street announcing, “Move back. Make way for the parade.”

Then the music began, and a procession of floats covered with thousands of tiny flashing electric lights paraded in front of us. Different Disney characters came by shaking our hands; and everyone was singing and laughing and clapping. Until finally the biggest, brightest, loudest float of all came; and there was Mickey Mouse. And everyone cheered.

We turned to each other breathless, and said, “Wow, this is bigger and better than we ever could have imagined.”

I

No doubt the anticipation of getting to Jerusalem for the Passover feast had been building among the disciples and followers of Jesus with each step of the journey. For three years the disciples had been traveling with him as he taught and performed mighty works. For three years, he had been preparing them for the trip to Jerusalem.

It was the dream of every Jew to make it to Jerusalem to the Temple for the Passover, and families saved and made plans for the special trip. Jerusalem, at the time of the Passover, would have been an exciting place, with bustling and crowded streets.

And really not a great percentage of the people who were in Jerusalem on that first day of the week would have been at the parade described in our gospel lesson. There were no loud speakers. There were no park attendants telling people to make way for the arrival of Jesus.

And there were other ironies, paradoxes about this event that began the holiest of weeks:

Jesus came into Jerusalem from performing a miracle, bringing back from death his friend Lazarus. Yet now he was riding to his own death.

Jesus rode on a colt, the foal of a donkey, a symbol of peace. Yet, the people under the oppressive rule of Rome would have preferred him on a white stallion, a symbol of military might.

As he rode the people shouted “Hosanna!” a shout of praise. Yet it was also a cry for help. The word in Hebrew literally means, “Save now!”

The crowd shouted, “Save now!” Yet by the week’s end, they would replace “Save now!” with “Crucify him!”

The people waved and laid before Jesus palm branches, usually interpreted as a sign of welcome and hospitality. Yet in some cultures, people use branches as extensions of their arms to ward off approaching evil or danger.

It is a Sunday of mixed signals, mixed messages, and mixed feelings. And we wonder: Is it a parade, or is it funeral procession? Is it a political rally, or is it a march for life?

III

Even with our moralizing and rationalizing, it is difficult to evade the foreboding implications of the palms and passion of this day. An innocent man is about to be put to death.

But do we really have to talk about that? Can we not just focus on the uplifting parts of the story, the acceptance and pardon, the forgiveness and mercy, the grace and love?

Can we not just remove the Passion from Palm Sunday, assign it to Good Friday, and make today a dress rehearsal for Easter? Better yet, could we just skip the passion part and go straight from palms and hosannas to lilies and hallelujahs?

That is how Anne Lamott feels when she writes, “I don’t have the right personality for Good Friday and the crucifixion. I’d like to skip ahead to the resurrection. In fact, I like the resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday School, who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside the empty tomb; everlasting life and a basketful of chocolates. Now you’re talking,” Lamott says.¹

II

We would like to skip the passion part of this week. But as Fred Craddock said, sooner or later somebody is going to ask, “What happened to Jesus after he rode into Jerusalem?” And when we tell the truth, that Jesus came to the city as a 33-year-

old with idealistic, anti-establishment teachings about the kingdom of God that stirred the authorities. And the city turned on him and put him on trial and executed him. When we tell that part of the story, some people are going to back away.²

No more violence and death, please. But we have to tell this part of the story, because it is through the suffering of Jesus that God reaches out to us in our suffering.

Fred Craddock illustrates it in an interesting way: “If a child falls down and skins a knee or elbow and comes running to mother, the mother picks up the child and says, “Let me kiss it and make it well.” And she picks up the child, kisses the skinned place, holds the child in her lap, and all is well.

Our daughter, a college professor, was researching grants, and she found a national study conducted on kissing boo boos. The study found that when boo boos are kissed, they really do heal quicker. But Craddock says in his illustration that it is not the mother’s kiss that makes the child well. It is the time spent in the lap of the mother.

“What is the cross? Can I say it this way?” Craddock asks, “It is to sit for a few minutes in the lap of a God who hurts because you hurt.”³

Conclusion

Each year on Palm Sunday weekend, I look for “Hosanna Save Us” images. Last year, the picture of the weekend was a Syrian refugee holding a sign that said, “Please help, or we will all die.” This year, it has been thousands of students holding signs saying save us from gun violence.

Whatever you do this week, take some time to pray some “Hosanna, save me” prayers. And each day, find ways to sit in the lap of God.

Attend with other believers in the city the midday services at the Methodist Church. Walk the Stations of the Cross here. Gather here at table with others on Thursday night and hear the sacramental words of remembrance. Come back Friday noon, and watch candles extinguished as you hear the words of our Lord from the cross. Sit in silence and pray, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Experience this week as Holy Week. So when you come next Sunday for the brass quintet, the blossoms, and the alleluias of resurrection, you will find yourself breathless, saying: “Wow, this is bigger and better than we ever could have imagined.” May it be so for each of us. Amen.

Notes

1. Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, 2004, p. 140.
2. Fred B. Craddock, “Why the Cross?” *Cherry Log Sermons*, 2001, pp, 78-83.
3. Ibid.