

Palm Sunday Sermon
April 9, 2017
“The Great Procession”
Matthew 21:1-11

Introduction

It was Palm Sunday, but because of a sore throat, five-year-old Johnny stayed home from church with his mother. When the rest of the family returned home, they were carrying palm branches, and the little boy asked what they were for.

“People waved them as Jesus went by,” his older brother explained.

“Wouldn’t you know it,” the little boy fumed. “The one Sunday I don’t go, Jesus shows up!”

I

I got up early today. I wanted to get around the parade of cyclists racing through downtown Morganton, and I wanted to see the procession for Palm Sunday of our Catholic brothers and sisters.

There is a difference, you know, between a parade and a procession.

A parade is what you have before a homecoming game.

A procession is what you have before a commencement ceremony.

A parade is for the inauguration of a president.

A procession is for a president’s funeral.

A parade is decorated bicycles ridden around a neighborhood.

A procession is food brought to a neighbor’s home where there has been a birth or a death.

A parade is Mardi Gras that begins Lent.

A procession is the Sunday that begins Holy Week.

Most times processions mark passages. Today’s procession takes us from the penitence of Lent to the glory of Easter. But we cannot get from palms to Easter lilies without first traveling the rocky road of Holy Week.

So today is a day of mixed messages, mixed metaphors, mixed emotions. We have palms, a symbol of welcome and hospitality. At the same time we are focusing on the cross, one of the cruelest means ever employed to put someone to death.

I am wearing a cross. It is shiny, decorative. I am wearing it like a piece of jewelry. Yet this is an instrument of death. It is like wearing an executioner’s rifle, a hangman’s noose or a headman’s axe.

Our beautiful children stood up here and sang. It was very sweet, yet they were standing in front of a cross.

I wonder: Has the symbol of the cross become so regular, so routine that we miss the magnitude of its meaning?

II

Rev. Heather Elkins tells about an experience with her husband Bill and their son Daniel when their son was four years old. They had gone to an old monastery, a long-abandoned retreat center that was scheduled for a corporate takeover. The architect for the corporation had offered its garden-variety statues to anyone who could manage to move them before the bulldozers reduced them to rubble.

So lured by an offer of relics, Heather, Bill, and Daniel struck out for the site. They drove as far as they could, then parked and traveled on foot like pilgrims to a shrine. It was quite a hike, she said, helping a four-year-old up an overgrown trail. The deserted monastery had been intentionally set apart from the highway. And the years of disuse had heightened its cloistered walls of isolation.

Once they reached the monastery's grounds, they realized the magnitude of their mistake. The classic forms would require the strength of cranes to move them, not the rescue efforts of two adults, one child, and an old Volkswagen. No amount of good will, Heather said, could save these larger than life saints.

So her husband, Bill, shrugged off the loss and prepared to fix their picnic lunch, while she and Daniel, the four-year old, went exploring in the garden area nearby. What they discovered she says she will long remember.

In the garden, at the center, stood a crucifix—a statue of Jesus on the cross. Even in its abandoned state, it dominated the scene.

Heather eyed its height and sighed a dismissal sigh. Too big. Too bad. And she lifted Daniel to leave.

Only the stiffness of the child stopped her. He had turned to stone. His eyes were like x-rays, restlessly scanning the body. From the shock of his face, she realized that he had never seen a crucifix before.

Every cross he had ever seen had been empty. This one was not empty. This one was filled with the dying agony of a good man.

"Jesus?" he questioned, eyes on the form.

"Jesus," she answered, turning away from the scene.

Suddenly the boy exploded into action and sound.

"Take him down!" he shouted. He began pushing against her shoulder, to move her, to move himself.

"Take him down! Take him down!"

Heather said, "I wondered, when did I learn to take this posture of Jesus for granted? How did I get to the point of seeing Jesus on the cross and just turning away to go get lunch? Why am I not shouting, "Take him down"?"

Against her useless, "We cannot take him down," Daniel's lament became louder and louder until his dad exploded through the bushes, coming to see what was the matter, what was troubling his son.

They took turns trying to comfort, to carry, to explain. (See end note.)

But there were no good words to take away the anguish.

When did we learn to turn away from Jesus on the cross? To shield our eyes from the nailed hands and feet, from the brow pierced with the crown of thorns?

There has become a hypnotic naturalness to the story of the cross. We decorate it. We desensitize it. We romanticize it. We ritualize it. We sanitize it. We sing nostalgic songs, we hear a nice meditation, and then we leave. And the sharp edges become dull, and the cross loses its shock.

III

Do you know what Hosanna means, that word we are singing today, the same word children and adults shouted on the first Palm Sunday? Hosanna is a contraction of two Hebrew terms, one that means to save or deliver and one that means to pray or petition.

“We pray, we beseech you, save us, deliver us.” I saw a picture of a Syrian holding a sign that said, “Please help, or we will all die.” I thought that is a hosanna picture for Palm Sunday 2017.

I owe the Catholic Church an apology. I stopped my car right by the route of their procession to take pictures. I was not thinking about how the morning had started with news of two terrorist Palm Sunday explosions at churches in Egypt, killing dozens. I saw the concerned look on the faces of the processors as they approached. Why would they not be concerned with a car parked beside their route? It was another hosanna picture for 2017.

That is why we are here today. We did not come just to see palm branches or to experience the choirs or the sermon. We came, hoping we could say, “Hosanna, Jesus, save us.” Save us from the endless cycle of violence that seems to have the world in its grip.

“Hosanna, Jesus, save me.” Save me from apathy. Save me from anger. Save me from arrogance. Save me from bitterness. Save me from the depths of depression and despair. Save me from fear. Save me from hunger in my soul. Save me from loneliness. Save me from strife. Save me from staring at the ceiling at 3 AM, wondering why I am here. Hosanna Jesus, save me.

Conclusion

This week, I want to ask you to do some special things to experience Holy Week: Read the gospel accounts of the trial and the crucifixion. Attend as many opportunities of worship as you can. This is Holy Week. Then...do something that you know is good for someone else but is inconvenient for you. Like giving blood or visiting someone at a place you have dreaded going or making contact with someone you have been avoiding or giving away something that you have been needing to get out of your life.

Do something difficult that will help you understand what it means to celebrate Easter in the face of the difficult week that came before Easter. Experience this week.

Listen and feel the words. Look and see on the cross the very dying form of one who suffered there for you. Do not to turn away. Look and listen until you feel yourself wanting to shout, "Take him down. Take him down."

Because then, only then, can you truly understand what it means to celebrate...that God, in fact, did.

May God make this week for you truly holy. Amen.

Reference: Story from Dr. *Heather Murray Elkins*, Professor of Worship, Preaching, and the Arts at Drew Theological School and the Graduate Division of Religion at Drew University.