

**Palm Sunday
April 9, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

I just read two verses from Matthew's Gospel ... a portion of what is known as the Passion of Jesus. As you will note in the lesson insert the Passion Gospel is actually five pages long. So, why did I choose to read only two verses? Because, Palm Sunday is both the end of a long journey, and the beginning of a week filled with other events that led to Good Friday, and I think this context gets overshadowed when we focus solely on the Passion. This morning I would like to focus on this larger context.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey with people waving palms along the way. Later that week he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple. He had a last meal with his disciples. He was arrested, tried, mocked, scourged, whipped, and hung on a cross to die. And then ... three days later ... he overcame death and rose from the dead.

This all started when Jesus chose to go to Jerusalem during the Passover festival. It all started when Jesus ... while in Caesarea Philippi ... the headwaters of the Jordan River in which Jesus had been baptized ... it all started when Jesus turned his sight to Jerusalem. Today, he arrived and rode a donkey into the city.

We began our liturgy this morning out on the steps with the blessing of the palms and then our processional into the church reminding us of Jesus' triumphal entry into the holy city. But for Jesus this entry into Jerusalem was the end of a very long journey that began way back at his baptism and his wilderness experience.

That wilderness experience is really about the choices Jesus faced ... and for that matter that we all face. As a child of God ... made in the image of God and all that is holy ... what does it mean to be true to that holiness? The three questions Jesus faced were: Would he sell out his authenticity to satiate his hunger? Would Jesus compromise the sacred trust that had been given him in exchange for the power of politics? Would Jesus trade the blessing bestowed upon him to be a mere miracle worker? Jesus left the wilderness knowing he would not do any of those things, but I wonder if he really knew the consequences of his decision as he began his ministry.

What Jesus did do is tell the truth ... and Jesus found the truth in others. A person cannot be healed if they don't want to be healed. A man will not see if he does not want to see. A woman will not stand up straight if she is afraid to stand up straight. Jesus told them the truth about themselves in a way that rang true with the truth they knew deep in their hearts and souls.

But for some this truth-telling ... and seeing the truth in others ... is intimidating. If one is lying ... or living a lie ... then speaking the truth to them is often threatening. Some people deny the truth in their lives and pretend they are someone they are not. They use their position in society to hide their vulnerabilities. They conceal their real selves thinking they can fool others ... and even themselves. Yet, I believe that deep in each of us we know that we are made in God's image ... that there is something holy in each and every child of God. So we fear being exposed to others for what we really are ... and we are afraid of being revealed even to ourselves. So, when Jesus ... the pure example of what holiness means ... entered the picture the last thing some people wanted was for him to get too close. He was a threat to the truth they were trying to hide from other ... and often from themselves.

Jesus wandered around Galilee teaching how to be an authentic child of a loving God. He cast out demons ... another way of saying that he helped people come to themselves. He healed people by releasing them from the fears that held them hostage. But Jesus also met resistance from those who were threatened by his authenticity ... intimidated when he connected to that which was holy within them. They were threatened because of what they just might have to give up if they were to even try to be authentic and genuine in their own lives. And many of those who were threatened were those in power ... those who were in control ... the religious elite who held a position in the structure ... the men of political power who existed in a system ... a system where they controlled those under them because they were controlled by those over them.

At some point in his wanderings Jesus knew he had to go to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the seat of the religious hierarchy. The place that was supposed to be holy but was being scandalized by a corrupt system. Honest, hard-working people were going to Jerusalem every year at the Passover festival hoping that their actions at the Temple would bring wholeness to their lives, but they always came away lacking. An inauthentic religious structure could not and cannot provide an authentic sacred experience with the holy. But some of those people had heard that even one encounter with Jesus could and did provide that authentic sacred experience with the holy within them.

So Jesus went to Jerusalem. And, I think he knew the consequences of his choice. To show the power of truth ... to show the deep authenticity of one who truly lived in God's image ... was to confront not only those who were living fraudulent lives, but also the whole system that supported them. But, Jesus went nonetheless. And Jesus went to Jerusalem during the Passover festival. This was not by accident ... it was by purposeful choice. He went to Jerusalem during the Passover when people's hopes and expectations were for the dawn of freedom that Moses had promised at that first Passover might suddenly be realized for them in their time. Jesus planned and executed his entrance into Jerusalem to send a message. According to the gospels his arrival was welcomed by many of his supporters, and so we have labeled it the Triumphal Entry.

Some who have studied the Gospels with new eyes suggest that Jesus' Triumphal Entry was a bit of political theater. As Pontius Pilate was entering Jerusalem from one side in a grand procession with an entourage and armed soldiers and banners flying, Jesus was entering Jerusalem from the other side on a donkey. Pilate with soldiers around him. Pilate ... with the insignias of the empire flying. Pilate ... representing occupying Roman government that had taken away their freedom. Pilate ... representing the oppression of the Jews by brute force and violence. Pilate entered Jerusalem in a display of power.

And Jesus was entering Jerusalem from the other side of the city. Instead of powerful horses Jesus rode a small donkey ... a beast of burden but also a symbol of peace. Instead of banners his followers waved palms. Jesus was living the prophesy of Zechariah, "Behold, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble, and riding on a donkey." Jesus entered the city at the same time as Pilate to show the people then ... and to show us now ... that God has another way. That violence is not the way. That hatred is not the way. That brute force and brutality is not the way. Jesus entered the city on Palm Sunday to show the people then that there was another way. And Jesus came to show all of us that there is another way. A way of unselfish, unconditional, sacrificial love. That is why he entered Jerusalem. That is why he went to the cross.

Jesus had arrived at the city to confront those who had displaced their true God-given selves with the lust of power in the religious and political systems. And it wasn't just Jesus that was doing the confronting ... it was the God-image in Jesus that was confronting those who had sold their God-image for a false security.

How do we know this story to be true in our lives? If we are all created in the image of a loving God and called to live fully into that image ... how well are we doing? What do you know about a part of you ... a holy and sacred part of you ... that has been compromised and therefore means you are not fully living into the image of God in which you were made? And what do you know about that part of you ... again, that holy and sacred part ... that is trying to confront those powers that have control of your life?

If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously then we not only seek justice and compassion and equity in the world around us, but we also confront those powers that compromise the holy and sacred that has been entrusted to us. Sometimes fear ... fear of death ... keeps us from confronting the powers out there. All we have to do is look at the world around us and see people who are actually being killed for standing up for the truth. But we also fear existential death ... being ignored or discounted or marginalized. Saying something to an acquaintance about a racist or sexist or homophobic joke ... when everyone else around you is laughing ... may leave you on the outs. That is the cost of truth-telling sometimes. But remember, that is not the end of the story ... there is Easter ... next week.

Today we are remembering the day that Jesus entered Jerusalem at the beginning of the last week of his life. This was Jesus finally facing the powers-that-be in Jerusalem ... the powers of the religious establishment ... and the powers of the Roman government. He knew the risk, but

he also knew that to be true to the image of God in which he was made there was no alternative. We, too, live with powers in our lives ... out there and in our own interior life ... powers that are contrary to living a life in the fullest image of a loving God. Sometimes we face those powers ... and sometimes we feel like we have been killed by them. Yet there is still more to the story to be told. Stay tuned for Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Amen.