

Palm Sunday
The Sunday of the Passion
March 28, 2021

**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.**

A year ago we were just beginning to understand what the impact of COVID-19 might be. Little did we know that over two and a half million people around the globe would die of this disease ... almost five hundred fifty thousand in this country alone. Little did we know that we would be stuck in our homes for over a year ... that we would attend church by watching it on a TV, or a computer screen, or a tablet, or our smart phone. Little did we know that we would not be able to hug parents, siblings, children, grandchildren. Little did we know that loved ones would die alone ... that the economic effects of the lockdown would stress some families to the limit ... that people would fight about whether to wear a mask or not.

Then the death of George Floyd brought systemic racism into a clearer focus. And an extremely divisive presidential election. Then an insurrection at our nation's capital. A year ago, on Palm Sunday, little did we know of the events that would shape our lives over the ensuing year.

In New Orleans, there's a unique tradition of parading for funerals. As the deceased person's body is moved from the church service to the cemetery there is a parade of mourners who follow. Instead of weeping and crying, there is a band and people are singing. Anyone who comes along is welcome to follow behind the band in a "second line" of singing and dancing to celebrate the deceased person's life.

In a "normal" year ... one without COVID restrictions so we could worship here at St. Cyprian's ... we would begin our Palm Sunday service outside the front steps ... blocking Lovett Street as we bless the palms and then begin our processional "All, Glory, Laud, and Honor" and parishioners would stream into the sanctuary. It's a way of remembering that while the day is jubilant, the parade that we are joining is also a funeral march.

In their book, ***The Last Week***, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan remind us that the decision of which way ... which path ... we are going to follow is at no point clearer on our Lenten journey than on Palm Sunday. Borg and Crossan write that as Jesus was entering Jerusalem from the west, Pilate ... in all his glory and with a military parade ... was entering Jerusalem from the east. Pilate had the authority and power and money of Rome. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey.

Palm Sunday is the day when Jesus staged a protest against the principalities and the powers of Pilate and Rome ... and the principalities and power in all the world in every age ... and asked his

followers to choose between the path of the world that perpetuates the status quo ... or the way of faith that embodies the Reign of God.

As we observe Palm Sunday, we should imagine Jesus asking us to join his procession, even though it leads to the cross. Marching in the Jesus procession challenges us to confront the crosses of poverty, racism, inequality, violence, environmental injustice, oppression of the LGBTQ+ community, a world that values money over all, and a country that has refused to fully welcome the stranger. Now the question becomes for us: which parade or procession will we choose?

The story from Mark's gospel tells us that those in the procession with Jesus in Jerusalem shouted "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Our imagination take us to the place of seeing shouts of joy and triumph. Just listen to our hymns this morning: "to whom the lips of children, sweet Hosannas ring;" and "Our acclamation breaks forth in shouts of praise, our triumphant song of joy: Hosanna;" and "Hosanna, loud hosannas the little children sang."

However, the translation of the Hebrew word "hosanna" is "save us ... rescue us." They are not yelling "hooray!" or "hallelujah." They are shouting for help. Yes, it was a triumphal entry, but with a plea for help in a desperate situation as much as a joyful expression of conquest.

Remember, these people were living in a land where they were oppressed by an occupying Roman Army ... and they were taxed to the point of poverty to support those Roman troops. And the Temple to their God was occupied by an illegitimate hierarchy of priest who exploited their own people in collaboration with the Romans.

Yes, the people wanted relief. They wanted someone to "save" them ... to "rescue" them. And, on Palm Sunday ... when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem ... they rejoiced that he just might come and turn the tables on the powers that controlled their lives.

Indeed, Jesus did turn the tables ... he turned over the tables of the money changers in the Temple. It was one way for Jesus to speak truth to power. And speaking truth to power is not acceptable to the principalities and powers of this world ... and it leads to death. That is why we hear the Passion read this Sunday ... the Passion story of Jesus' suffering ... his arrest, trial, beating, crucifixion, and death.

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers From Prison*, he wrote, "Only a suffering God can help." Bonhoeffer also wrote: "To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some particular form of asceticism ... but to be a human being. It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world."

If these were "normal" times, we'd be preparing to spend many hours together at St. Cyprian's over the next few days. As I mentioned already, today, we would have gather outside for the

Blessing of the Palms, and then we would have processed into the church waving palm branches. On Wednesday we would live into the devotion of the Stations of the Cross. The Stations of the Cross is a Lenten discipline that George Sage and Dr. Dorothy Israel have led for many years at St. Cyprian's. In "normal" times Wednesday would have been the last time for the Stations of the Cross in this Lenten season. If these were "normal" times, on Maundy Thursday, we would wash each other's feet, and then share a simple holy meal of bread and wine remembering the Last Supper, and then strip our altar bare. And, if these were "normal" times, on Good Friday, we'd do our St. Cyprian's thing ... maybe a simple Taize service reflecting on the Passion, and then walk the labyrinth. On Holy Saturday, we'd wait, drained and tired, perhaps, but full of anticipation for Easter and its many joys.

But we are not back to "normal" times yet ... or the "new normal," whatever that may look like. Next Sunday ... Easter Sunday ... we will gather together as a faith community for the first time in over a year. Yet we will be wearing masks, and have to stay socially distant ... no handshakes and hugs at the sharing of the Peace ... no kneeling next to each other at the communion rail and sharing wine from a common cup.

What is there to say? What does our faith offer us in perilous times like these? On this Palm Sunday ... this Passion Sunday ... I think it offers us a core truth ... a healing truth ... a paradoxical and shocking truth: only a suffering God can help. And, a suffering God ... a crucified, broken, desolate God ... is what we have.

The Jesus we find in this story from Mark's Gospel is not a Jesus who presides victoriously over his own final chapter. He is a man who suffers in utter vulnerability, nakedness, and isolation. When he prays in Gethsemane, he "throws himself on the ground," and pleads for his life. His flogging at the hands of Pilate's soldiers weakens him so much that he can't bear the weight of his own cross ... Simon of Cyrene carries it for him.

Embracing this shamed and suffering God ... much less following him ... is not easy. On the cross, Jesus bears the violence, the contempt, the pain, and the humiliation of the entire world and absorbs it into his own body. He declares solidarity for all time with those who are abandoned, marginalized, frightened, oppressed, imprisoned, beaten, mocked, and murdered. He takes an instrument of torture and turns it into a bizarre vehicle of hospitality and communion for all people, everywhere ... and in every age.

To take up a cross as Jesus does is to stand, always, in the center of the world's pain. Not just to glance in the general direction of suffering and then sidle away ... but to dwell in that pain as if it were our own. To identify ourselves wholly with those who are aching, weeping, screaming, and dying. Taking up the cross means recognizing Christ crucified in every suffering soul and body that surrounds us, and pouring our energies and our lives into alleviating that pain ... no matter what it costs.

In the context of what has happened and what is still happening in our world today, it means trusting that God is in the very midst of the loss and terror, mourning with and for us. It means

accepting that we will die ... if not now then later ... and trusting that we, like Jesus, will also rise again.

On this Palm Sunday ... this Passion Sunday ... we should imagine Jesus asking us to join his procession, even though it leads to the cross. Marching in the Jesus procession challenges us to confront and re-vision the crosses of poverty, racism, inequality, violence, environmental injustice, oppression of the LGBTQ+ community, a world that values money over all, and a country that has refused to fully welcome the stranger.

The “Hosannas” we shout now sound more like real pleas for help by taking seriously what Jesus took seriously ... “save us” from this systemic racism that is killing black, and Asian, and Latino men and women ... “rescue us” from the animosity that divides this nation and leaves us impotent to change the status quo ... “save us” from mass shootings ... from environmental catastrophe ... deadly pandemics. Hosanna! Hosanna! ... Please, please rescue us from ourselves!

If we can re-vision the world, the question becomes for us, which parade or procession will we choose? Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write that as Jesus was entering Jerusalem from the west, Pilate ... in all his glory and with a military parade ... was entering Jerusalem from the east. Pilate had the authority and power and money of Rome. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Yes, he spoke truth to Pilate’s power ... and he spoke truth to the power of the Temple elite ... and it led to his death.

Yet Jesus was not without power ... power to wash his disciple’s feet and show them that the way of leadership is to serve. He shared bread and wine with his disciples ... and asked them to do the same with all they met after his death ... to show the power of community. And, Jesus gave his life to show the power of love that is willing to serve the common good and not selfish desires.

I’ll be honest ... like many of you, I come to this Holy Week confused, tired, and afraid. Who knows how many deaths there may still be waiting around the corner? How many disappointments, sorrows, farewells, and unfinished endings we will face before we can find the joy of the Resurrection? However, if anything in the Christian story is true, then this is true as well ... our suffering God will not leave us alone. There is no death we will die ... small or big ... literal or figurative ... that Jesus will not hold in his crucified arms.

I’ll end with a poem by Carol Penner –

Coming to a City Near You

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you.
Jesus comes to the gate, to the synagogue,
to houses prepared for wedding parties,
to the pools where people wait to be healed,
to the temple where lambs are sold,

to gardens, beautiful in the moonlight.
He comes to the governor's palace.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you,
to new subdivisions and trailer parks,
to penthouses and basement apartments,
to the factory, the hospital and the Cineplex,
to the big box outlet centre and to churches,
with the same old same old message,
unchanged from the beginning of time.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you
with his Good News and...
Hope erupts! Joy springs forth!
The very stones cry out,
"Hosanna in the highest,
blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"
The crowds jostle and push,
they can't get close enough!
People running alongside flinging down their coats before him!
Jesus, the parade marshal, waving, smiling.
The paparazzi elbow for room,
looking for that perfect picture for the headline,
"The Man Who Would Be King".

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you
and gets the red carpet treatment.
Children waving real palm branches from the florist,
silk palm branches from Wal-mart,
palms made from green construction paper.
Hosannas ringing in churches, chapels, cathedrals,
in monasteries, basilicas and tent-meetings.
King Jesus, honored in a thousand hymns
in Canada, Cameroon, Calcutta and Canberra.
We LOVE this great big powerful capital K King Jesus
coming in glory and splendor and majesty
and awe and power and might.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you.
Kingly, he takes a towel and washes feet.
With majesty, he serves bread and wine.
With honour, he prays all night.
With power, he puts on chains.
Jesus, King of all creation, appears in state

in the eyes of the prisoner, the AIDS orphan, the crack addict,
asking for one cup of cold water,
one coat shared with someone who has none,
one heart, yours,
and a second mile.
Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you.
Can you see him?

So, welcome to Holy Week. Here we are, and here is our suffering, sorrowing, saving God.
Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the One who comes to die so that we will live.

Amen.