

Gospel - Mark 15: 1-39

Sunday of the Passion – Palm Sunday

Sermon 3.28.21

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Our observance of Palm Sunday begins with so much hope. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on the back of an unbroken colt. An action he has deliberately chosen. An action reserved for rulers. Crowds cheer him on throwing their coats into the road and waving branches before his path. They shout Hosannas and bless the one who has come to set them free from Roman oppression. And yet this Sunday always moves us to the cross. Jesus arrested, tortured, murdered. It's a hard place to be.

Last Sunday Fr Duane said in his sermon that as Jesus set his focus on Jerusalem, his goal was death. I'd never heard it said in those exact words, and it was such a startling statement that I wanted to protest.

Surely, I thought, Jesus's goal was something else. He was going to Jerusalem to spread the Good News like he had around the countryside. He was going to preach, and teach, and heal, and gather up followers. Right?

Wrong. Jesus was going to the seat of religious power to speak truth to that power. And he knew the confrontation would lead to his death. He had told his disciples as much. And they didn't want to believe it; they didn't know how to believe it. And I am exactly like the disciples.

Every year as we enter Holy Week, I wish for a different outcome, as if the Gospels have morphed into a "choose your own adventure" book, and I can write a different ending, an ending where the religious leaders have their eyes opened to the ways they've corrupted God's word. An ending where they invite Jesus to lead them in a complete overhaul of the church, and give up their power for the good of others. An ending where God's kingdom comes, where God's will is done on earth right then. An ending where Jesus not only gets to live, but gets to live happily ever after.

My ending is a fantasy born of love, and naivete, and self-protection. Love, because it's been my practice as we move through Holy Week to identify with Jesus and his suffering. And out of love, I want to spare him from this violent death and emotional pain. Naivete, because I have not wanted to believe that those in power would go to such extremes when threatened. I wanted to think that their response was an aberration. And self-protection, because if I could somehow erase the crucifixion, if I could somehow make it unnecessary, then I could feel safe. I wouldn't have to confront my own discomfort at the injustices in the

world, I wouldn't have to face my complicity in systems that oppress others, and I could ignore my failure to be like Jesus, my unwillingness to sacrifice my life for God.

Unless we're brand new to the faith, we come to the edge of Holy Week with the experience of having cycled through this liturgical season before. We come with expectations about how we will carry the weight of this week along with living in a world that largely carries on without marking its significance. We hold the tension of Jesus journeying toward death, while we live with the gift of the Resurrection. And we approach this week with rituals, both personal and communal for observing the critical events in our religious heritage.

Last year we observed Holy Week in lockdown. This year we approach at what I pray is the beginning of the end of the pandemic, as more and more of us are vaccinated against COVID-19, as the counties in our state move into Phase 3 of reopening. And as our Vestry plans and prepares for St. David's to safely reopen for in person worship. We have spent more than a year in the wilderness, isolated from one another, all the small things we once did without thinking, like sitting in crowds and hugging, have become magnified.

We have lived through a year that has also magnified our brokenness and shone a spotlight on our sinful human nature. And without our ability to gather safely, these events have left many of us feeling powerless. COVID-19 has killed 2.77 million people worldwide, claiming over half a million in the U.S. Systemic racism and the murder of Black Americans as a law enforcement response has been exposed in ways that we with white privilege can no longer ignore. Hate crimes against Asian Americans and mass shootings have filled our newsfeeds in recent weeks. Christian Nationalism has hijacked everything Jesus stood for. And those at the highest levels of power in our government, responded to election results with denial, invented claims of voter fraud, and insurrection. When those tactics failed, they began a campaign of voter suppression legislation in states across the country. In Georgia, it is now a crime to offer water to voters waiting in line.

More than ever before I see how much the injustice in our time and place looks like the injustice in Jesus's time and place. As much as I've wanted to believe in progress, I find the present mirroring the past. And for me, that means confronting the reality that we are still in desperate need of Jesus's sacrifice. It means coming to terms with the fact, that like the disciples, I do not know how to accompany Jesus all the way to the cross or to stay with him until his death.

Like the disciples, I do not know what to do when everything looks like it's going to hell and I can't stop it. In our natural fight, flight, or freeze response, both the disciples and I opt for flight and freeze. Like the disciples, I don't know what to say, so I keep quiet when I ought to speak up. Like the disciples, I'm not brave enough to risk the consequences of speaking truth to power, so I run for safety. And like the disciples, I abandon Jesus in his final hours when bearing witness to his pain feels just too difficult.

To accept the inevitability of Jesus's sacrifice means also to accept the inevitability of the disciples' failure. And to accept the inevitability of the disciples' failure, means to accept the inevitability of my own failure. And that is so difficult. I want so very much not to fail. I want so very much to love God with all my heart, soul, and mind. I want to emulate Jesus. Except when I don't. Except when I'm too frightened, too tired, too lazy, too distracted, too upset, too confused. Too... In short, I always fall short. And I always will.

Thankfully, the crucifixion is not the end of the story. And in many ways, it's just the beginning of the disciples' story. But I don't want to jump too far ahead. I want to carry my palm branch along with my own weakness. I want to honor this king riding into Jerusalem on a borrowed colt, this one who gave up power in order to empower others, who sacrificed his rights rather than insist upon them, who challenged us to find comfort and safety by letting go of our striving. I want to hold that image of Jesus buoyed by the triumphant crowd before we all failed him. Despite the coming fiasco, despite our well-intentioned betrayal, despite everything that will happen next, I know in that moment, looking at Jesus, we will see in his eyes the hint of forgiveness and the shimmer of God's eternal promise.