

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
March 28, 2021
Palm Sunday
Mark 11:1-11
Mark 15:1-15

“Crowd Control”

“Palm Sunday,” Fleming Rutledge says, “has always been a crowd pleaser: the festivity of the procession, the stirring music, the repeated ‘Hosannas.’” It’s a great day to come to church. I know a lot of people think if you’re only going to come to church once or twice a year it should be on Christmas and Easter, but honestly, I think you should come on Palm Sunday. In my opinion it is the most important Sunday of the year.

But when I told my husband Terry this, he said “Really, more important than the resurrection and Easter?” Now that was a difficult question to answer because the resurrection is, of course, the very foundation of our faith. We consider every Sunday to be a mini-Easter, because every Sunday we celebrate the resurrection. I would argue that all of the Gospels-which contain the stories of Jesus’ mission and ministry, point toward the resurrection, not the crucifixion. The resurrection is the lens through which we view everything, including our own lives and our own ultimate destiny. It is the resurrection we celebrate, not the crucifixion. Had there not been a resurrection, Jesus would have been just another man the Romans sentenced to death. We may remember him for being a prophet or a person of great virtue, like we remember Ghandi or Martin Luther King, or even Mother Teresa, but he wouldn’t be someone we worship and are bold enough to call the Messiah, the Son of God, our Lord and Savior.

And yet, there was still something gnawing at me that said, “This is the most important day.” But why? What makes it so important? And then it finally dawned on me: the resurrection, I concluded, shows us the what; what it all means. **But Palm Sunday expresses the why: why should we follow? For me, Palm Sunday gets to the real heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, and why it’s so important to follow him;**

because everything Jesus lived for and stood for and died for-and tells us to live for and stand for and die for- comes to a head today.

It was Yogi Berra, I believe, who famously said, "If you come to a fork in the road, take it." Well, sometimes you can't do that. Sometimes you have to make a decision, this way or that way. Jesus made a decision to go to Jerusalem. He made a decision to enter that holy city with great purpose. Following the words of the Hebrew prophet Zechariah, which Jesus, his followers, and the Pharisees would have known very well, he did exactly what the prophet Zechariah said the future Messiah would do: he took a colt and rode it into the city. It was the beginning of the end, and Jesus knew it. Make no mistake about it, Jesus knew exactly what he was doing every step of the way when he made the decision to enter Jerusalem, and he knew exactly how it was going to end. On the surface, he may look like one being manhandled by the powers of darkness, but he walks confidently, faithfully, and obediently. He knows who he is, and he knows what he's come to do. He is, throughout it all, an obedient Son who has come to offer his life for many yet still dies in anguish with a loud cry and an unanswered prayer. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The last time we see Jesus in Mark's gospel, his dead body is being taken down from the cross and buried by Joseph of Arimathea.

My God, my God, why?

The famous preacher William Sloane Coffin said once, "It is a Good Friday world." By this I assume he means we live in a world of suffering and pain and injustice. That our world is filled with crucifixions.

Certainly if you read the paper and listen to the news it does seem we like live in a Good Friday world. Most of the world lives in horrible poverty with hardly a roof over their heads and clean water to drink. The global scramble for a COVID-19 vaccine has left developing countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa far behind rich nations in inoculating their citizens. Just yesterday, Myanmar had its bloodiest day yet, with over 90 people killed by the military that overthrew their civilian government. Among those killed were a 5-year-old boy, two 13-year-old boys and a 14-year-old girl.

Of course, we don't have to look across oceans to see crucifixions. Ten people killed in Boulder *in a grocery store*. The police officer who was first on the scene had 7 children. Seven children! Eight people were killed in Atlanta just the week before that. Those women were at work! Oh, but it wasn't a hate crime, people say. He said why he did it, they protest. Great, I think to myself sarcastically. Because if it wasn't hate, it was really bad theology born from a really crazy conservative Christianity that touts a purity culture that objectifies women. Crucifixions happen every day.

Why?

My God, my God, why?

This is the question Pilate asks. Pilate of all people. The one we've always assumed was the bad guy. "Why?" he asks. "Why? What evil has he done?" I'd never paid much attention to that question. But it's such a good question to ask, especially now, and it should be asked more often. Pilate knows that the only reason the chief priests have handed Jesus over to him is because they're jealous. He knows Jesus isn't guilty of the crime with which they've charged him. What evil has he done? Why is he accused? Why is he being charged? Why are you set on the destruction of this life?

Last Saturday, after we went and demonstrated to show our support and love for our fellow church members, WANE-15 posted the story to their Facebook page. I was so happy to see that and the coverage we were getting. And then I started reading the comments. Never read the comments. It wasn't hate; get a life; sick of the race card being played; he said why he did it; and the vilest of all of them: those women were in a nasty business. So they deserved what they got?

My God, my God, why? Why do we insist on crucifying?

So many innocent lives lost, and not only at the hands of the law givers and rulers and those who have the authority to stop and ask the question "Why is this person being brought to me? Why is he being charged? Why are you set on the destruction of this life?"

Why?

When someone says “why”, do we take a moment to question to our response, or do we just yell crucify him? Or her. Don’t tell me the facts. I don’t want to hear the truth.

Friends, there couldn’t be a more timely question. Because here’s the thing. We can look around at these contemporary crucifixions and blame others – law enforcement, the judicial system, an economy in which women have to work at a massage parlor in order to make a living – but at the end of the day, we benefit from those systems. Those systems protect our privileges.

We may look back and say, “Wow. I can’t believe they crucified him!”
Really???

It’s so utterly predictable what happened to Jesus. The crowd stood by and yelled crucify because they wanted to protect their privileges. All of them.

At the beginning of Mark’s gospel, Jesus is so famous he can’t travel freely. At the end, they’re demanding an insurrectionist and murderer be released instead of Jesus.

At the beginning of Mark, the disciples drop everything to follow Jesus. At the end, Judas betrays him, Peter denies him, and the rest deserted him and fled the scene.

All throughout Mark’s gospel, Jesus exorcises demons, rebukes evil spirits, tells a chaotic tempest on the sea to “be still”, and drives into a herd of swine demons tormenting a man. But at the end, it would appear evil has the final word. The Jesus who seemed so in command is now passed freely from evil hand to evil hand. *And it did not have to be that way.* The suffering an agony Jesus endured is suffering that is the consequence of injustice. The kind of suffering that does not have to be; that cries out for an end not in death but in change.

My God my God, why have you forsaken me? It is a loud cry, and an unanswered prayer. How shall we answer it?

On Palm Sunday, we come to a fork in the road and we have a decision to make: we can either follow Jesus all the way to the bitter end-being faithful and obedient to his ways and message, or we can choose not to. If you choose to follow him, it means you are making a decision to stand up to the crucifixions you see and to never allow one to happen ever again. It means not looking the other way when you see injustice taking place; it means speaking up when you see someone innocent suffering; it means speaking out when someone is unjustly condemned; it means standing up to the bullies of the world; and it means not being one yourself.

Today we gather before the cross and hear the Roman centurion say, “Truly this man was God’s son.” If we decide to follow him, we must honestly appraise the situations before us. On Palm Sunday we learn that the way of discipleship means deciding, “Because I am a Christian, because I am a follow of Jesus Christ, I will no longer participate in the crucifixions of the world.” That stand takes great courage. It will certainly provoke controversy and opposition, but it is the way to God.

Palm Sunday is a great day to come church. You could come on Christmas and hear the wonderful story of Jesus’ birth, and you could come on Easter to hear the wonderful news of his resurrection, but you would miss everything that happens in between. And you’d miss everything you are called to do as Christ’s follower, and to me it’s what we do with what we believe that is the most **important** part.

Amen.

Sources:

www.workingpreacher.org

Rev. John Buchanan, Fourth Presbyterian Church, for his thoughts on Palm Sunday

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