

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
April 10, 2022
Luke 19:28-40
Palm Sunday

“Who Doesn’t Love a Parade?”

Palm Sunday is hands-down my favorite worship service of the year. More than Easter, more than any of the Sundays of Advent; even more than Christmas Eve. Which says something, because I love Christmas. But Palm Sunday? Chef’s kiss! The procession, the music, the pageantry of it all. It’s a great day to come to church.

Peter Gomes once said that we like Palm Sunday because everyone loves a parade. And that’s probably true!

But Palm Sunday is my favorite day for another reason. We experience the theological high of Christ in all his glory and the theological low of God on the cross. It begins with a wonderful festive parade and shouts of joyful “hosannas” and ends with shouts of “crucify him!” We say and experience all of these things on Palm Sunday. Maybe that’s why I’m always a little teary during the singing of “All Glory, Laud, and Honor” because I know how the story is going to end.

I believe Jesus also knew how the story would end. I think he knew it was dangerous to come to Jerusalem and enter it like he did. After all, he’d been warned by the Pharisees that Herod “that fox” was out to get him. But here he is anyways, telling the disciples to go into the village and bring him the colt they will find there; and in case anyone asks who needs it tell the people “the Lord needs it.” The *Lord* needs it.

That statement alone would have gotten him into loads of trouble because Herod and his minions didn’t need some wanna-be lord parading around their kingdom. They were lord enough, thank you very much.

But then Jesus had the nerve to get on that colt and ride it into the city. And the onlookers cried out: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” Well, it’s too much; and the Pharisees tell him so. “Order them to stop” they yell. But he doesn’t; instead, he

tells the Pharisees that even if the people were silent, the stones would shout out for them.

What's interesting about Luke's version of Palm Sunday is that it's devoid of any palms or shouts of Hosanna! Instead all of that is replaced with a Jesus who is firmly in control. He knows exactly what he is doing. Make no mistake about it his actions are intentional. And they are intentional up until the very end. At least in Luke's gospel they are. There's no "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" like there is in Mark. Instead he cries from the cross: "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." And, "Into your hands, I commend my Spirit."

So why? Why did he do it? Why did he stride into Jerusalem like he did knowing it would end in his death?

Theories abound of course. Some say he was following the script that God had written for him; that he went to the cross to die for our sins. People say it all the time but the older I get the less it makes sense to me.

Some say he died because the things he was passionate about put him in direct conflict with the Roman Empire, so they had to execute him. Now this theory I can understand. Biblical historians tell us that it was not uncommon for the road to Jerusalem to be lined with crosses, each of them bearing a body. A daily reminder of the threat of execution if there ever was one.

Imagine what life was like for the people who lived in the shadow of those crosses. Imagine how their hopes shriveled under the constant threat and terror of the Roman Empire. Which was the point, of course. The crosses were meant to intimidate. The crosses were the Roman Empire's way of making crystal clear: "You can have your religion. You can worship whatever you want. But don't forget, even for a minute, who really holds sway over your life. Go to your temple if it suits you, call on your God if it makes you feel good, but never, ever mess with the power structures that actually control your world. Don't even think about resisting. If you do, we'll hang you up, too."

Those crosses made quite the statement – and Jesus would have known that. But he rode that colt into Jerusalem despite it. So I understand why some people say he died because of the things he advocated for and preached.

But for me, that's not enough because I believe Jesus was more than an insurrectionist. I believe Jesus was God incarnate and so somehow, some way, God climbed up on the cross because of love. When I think about the fear those crosses were meant to instill in the people who gazed up at them, and then think about Jesus willingly taking up one of those crosses . . . for me -- it's an act of love. It's an act that says, "I will not stop for you. I will not choose safety at the expense of injustice and evil. I will not save my own skin while the people I love are suffering and dying."

I believe that because Jesus came to the city, we can count on God to be present, to be our companion, our support, and our strength; and when sickness, debilitation, pain, and even death itself comes, God is there with us. Because of the cross, God assumes our suffering. Because of the cross, God weeps when we weep. Because of the cross, Jesus insists that God is in the hard things, the low things, the scandalous things, and the gritty, messy, broken things.

German theologian Jürgen Moltmann has been helpful in my thinking about this. As a seventeen-year-old in the German army, he was caught in the Allied bombing of his German hometown in which 40,000 civilians died, and he wondered, where is God in this? Later, in a British POW camp he was shown pictures of concentration camps in which his countrymen were gassing and burning millions of Jews and again he wondered where God was.

Moltmann remembers the day when he made the connection between the innocent suffering of Jewish men, women, and children and German civilians with the cross and the suffering of Jesus Christ—the suffering of God in Christ.

He asked, "Is God the transcendent and untouched stage manager of the theater of this violent world, or is God in Christ the central engaged figure in this world's tragedy?" Out of his own experience Moltmann concluded that in Jesus Christ, God enters fully into human life, enters and experiences human suffering, weeps beside us and with us, and holds us up with loving arms when we are falling (*The Passion for God: The Crucified God Yesterday and Today*).

Indeed, I believe that when we look at the cross on Good Friday, the reason we can call it Good is because Christ's arms stretch out to meet us no matter where we are, who we are, or in what condition we find ourselves.

Someone asked me a couple weeks ago if I had given up anything for Lent. I answered “no”; but what I wanted to respond is that I have. But what has gotten me through losing my Dad is my faith, and the fervent belief that because of the cross God understands fully the pain of my loss.

On his last night with his disciples, Jesus was talking with them. They didn’t know where Jesus was going, hadn’t yet grasped that a cross awaited him the next day, and they were afraid. And Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” What he’s saying is that God leaves no one alone. God leaves no one behind. In Jesus Christ, God comes to us and brings us to God, no matter where we are, every step of the way, because God loves us.

On Palm Sunday, we see God coming to meet us—just like Zechariah proclaimed. And because of the events of Palm Sunday, when we look to Good Friday, we see God become one with us, stooping down into your life and mine. William Willimon says: “Christians believe that when we look at Jesus on the cross, we are privileged to see as much of God as we ever hope to see. The cross is not simply the truth about the human condition, it is the truth about God” (*Thank God It’s Friday*, p. 89).

God loves us so much, that God does that for us. God comes into life where it is lived, into your life and mine, wherever we are, whoever we are—young, middle-aged, old, healthy or sick, happy or sad, confident or scared to death, serene or anxious—God comes and bids us to live our lives, following Jesus, with intentionality and the vulnerability of great love.

Palm Sunday, Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday—this holiest of weeks in which Jesus suffers and dies—is God giving God’s own heart to the world, to you and me and every one of us.

And so whatever else you do this week, find a way to pause and ponder that wondrous love:

What wondrous love is this, o my soul?
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss
To bear the heavy cross for my soul, for my soul,
To bear the heavy cross for my soul.

Amen.

Sources:

www.workingpreacher.org

Rev. John Buchanan, for his thoughts on Palm Sunday

www.journeywithjesus.net "Cruciform", Debie Thomas, Posted 03 April 2022