

“Into Your Hands”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 28, 2021

Palm / Passion Sunday Rev. John Wahl Luke 19:28-40; 23:32-47

Palm Sunday is known for its parades; with children waving palm branches and members of the congregation singing songs of *Hosanna!* – which means, “God save us!” – all to re-create this story of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem for Holy Week; when he will be arrested, accused, and crucified; only to rise from the tomb to new life.

But, in Luke’s gospel, we encounter a story with no palm branches or shouts of *Hosanna!* Instead, we are told that multitudes of disciples spread their cloaks on the road as Jesus passes by and praised God, saying: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

When Jesus comes into Jerusalem, from the East, he does so riding on a humble donkey; an animal typically used for manual labor; surrounded by the outcast and oppressed. On the other side of Jerusalem, Roman leaders would have – at the same time – ridden into town on noble white horses; a conquerors’ show of force during the festival week of the Passover.

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” Why? Surely, they are aware that these two contrasting parades – Jesus coming from the east and the Romans entering from the west – are bound to collide. Do they have a sense of what is going to happen and want to protect him; to keep the peace? Is it to stop Jesus in his tracks?¹

Jesus replies, saying: “I tell you even if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” The stones are today’s Lenten symbol: a variety of rocks representing the many different voices that are proclaiming Jesus as their king: a peaceful teacher riding on a humble donkey, coming to confront the purveyors of violence and death.

But, today is not only Palm Sunday, but Passion Sunday, as well. Our second reading comes from the 23rd chapter of Luke: the story of the crucifixion of Jesus, verses 32 through 47.

¹ Greg Carey from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Read second scripture

After being betrayed by Judas, his disciple, and arrested by servants of the high priest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was kept in custody by the religious authorities all night. In the morning, he was questioned by the religious leaders, then Herod, then Pilate again. Charges were brought against him and Pilate conceded to the shouts of the people that Jesus be crucified. This is where we enter the story.

We are told that Jesus is hung on a cross alongside two criminals; this was a common practice used by the Romans to assert their control. The first words we hear Jesus speak from the cross are, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” It is unclear who Jesus is addressing here: is it these two criminals by his side; or the Roman soldiers who lifted him up on the cross; or the people in the crowds who called for his crucifixion; or any, and all, people who choose to embrace the ways of violence instead of peace?

The theme of forgiveness here is consistent with Jesus’ life and teaching: “love your enemies,” he had said; and “forgive (others) not seven times but seventy times seven.” Even during the brutal act of crucifixion, Jesus voices his compassion for those who harm him.

A second saying of Jesus is addressed to the thief beside him on the cross. Not to the first thief, who mocks Jesus in the same way that the guards and leaders had mocked him, but to the second criminal who asks to be remembered when Jesus came into his kingdom. As he had so many times during life, Jesus again opens a path of blessing to a sinner, responding: “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

It might be fair to question the sincerity of this criminal: is he being genuine in faith or simply self-interested? For Jesus, the motivation doesn’t seem to matter; the point is not about whether the criminal deserved forgiveness, but on the enormity of God’s compassion. As in the parables of the finding in Luke 15 – the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son – the focus is properly placed on the joy of the finder rather than the attitude or experience of the one that is being found. Jesus has already forgiven those who called for him to be crucified and the soldiers who lifted him onto the cross; so, to forgive this criminal is well within his character.²

The final words of Jesus, before taking his last breath, are: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Jesus does not cry out in agony or ask to be spared of this death. He has known – since the time he began his long, final journey to Jerusalem – that he must be lifted up on the cross before he could be raised up to new life; that he had to die, not because God willed or wanted him to, but instead as a

² Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*

result of the inevitable clash between Jesus' way of peaceful compassion and the Roman way of violence and death.

The story of Jesus' passion makes it abundantly clear that human beings are capable of doing horrible things. The multitude of disciples who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday – claiming him to be their king – seem to disappear or change their mind in the course of only a few, short days. Some are willing participants, some are silently complicit, some just want to maintain a façade of peace and safety.

Ever-confronted with examples and messages of violence – from brutal mass murders to police misconduct to deadly protests – we, too, respond in a variety of ways. Some of us are outspoken, while others reticent. Some head out to march in the streets, while others retreat behind locked gates. Some claim more guns and more walls will protect us; others push for a peace that is found only in unity among all.

It is tempting for us to skip over the Passion story; to instead go straight from Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to his resurrection on Easter morning. And this year, of all years, when we will not be gathering to commemorate Maundy Thursday and Good Friday; when we have already endured so much disruption, pain, and change, we may want to fast-forward over Jesus' death to a more positive message of new life.

But reading the Passion story this year reminds us of the breadth and depth of Jesus' compassion for us. Jesus knows how we are hurting; and how we each respond differently to the type of pain we are experiencing. Some of us, like the first criminal, are despondent about the events and direction of today's world; we are unsure what, if anything, we can do to make any real difference. To those of us like him, Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

And yet, some of us – at least some of the time – see things differently. Amid challenging and uncertain circumstances, our eyes are being opened to the injustices and inequities around us; to how the ways of violence are failing us, and we are even more motivated to create change. Like the second criminal, we are uncertain what new future may be coming, but we have vowed not to be passive participants in the ways of death. Instead, we call out for the new kingdom to come; and for this compassionate king – Jesus – to teach us how to participate peacefully in it.

Thus, we view the crucifixion of Jesus as a seminal event, but not a singular one. The death of Jesus took place once; the inevitable product of a clash between two kings – and two ways of ruling – by peace or power. And God redeemed that death by raising Jesus from the dead: breathing life into the message of forgiveness for all; compassion for anyone.

Confronted, as we are, by the powers of death, we remember that Jesus has compassion on us all. Whether or not we knew – at the time – what we were doing, our past inactions and misguided efforts are forgiven. Sometimes, we want to escape from the forces of death because they are too painful to face; but, our motivations need not be pure. God has compassion on us.

Still, God wants us to join in the creation of a peaceful kingdom by recognizing where the ways of Jesus and the ways of the world are at odds; where power and peace clash; where he who was innocent is victorious over those who sought to silence him. Thus, we are to walk in the ways of Jesus, our king; to remember the power of compassion; and to speak out on behalf of the innocent, the outcast, and the oppressed.

This holy week, and every week; this year, of all years, let us receive the compassion of Christ and join in working for the peaceful kingdom. When, inevitably, the forces of power and peace collide, let us be like those stones that will not remain silent; and cannot help but shout out that death has will not have the last word. Amen.