

“Hosanna Turns to Crucify”

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 10, 2022

Palm / Passion Sunday

Psalm 24

Rev. John Wahl

John 12:12-15, 24-27 and 19:16b-22

Jesus has fans and foes at the Passover festival; and they're all waiting and wondering about whether he will show up and what he'll do if he does. When Jesus is in Bethany, at the home of Lazarus, and Mary comes to wash his feet with perfume and wipe them with her hair, Jesus says that his time has finally come. The chief priests and Pharisees – who know that Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave – have put out the word to arrest Jesus on sight.

But no one waving palm branches in the crowd that day wanted or expected Jesus to willingly go to the cross. Those who had come to the Jerusalem with Jesus from Galilee or who had followed him from Bethany were waiting to see a miracle worker. They were looking for a showdown between Jesus and the authorities; they wanted and expected a revolutionary to come and overthrow the status quo.

If there's one thing every Jew in Jerusalem in the first century wanted, it was a Messiah. They wanted a king; a real king, not like Herod and his offspring. Most imagined this would be a warrior to lead an uprising to free them from Roman power. The Messiah would come like David, combining spiritual holiness with military might. Some thought Jesus, this miracle worker, might be the one.

Even the Jewish leaders like the chief priests and Sadducees – people who enjoyed some privilege within the current Roman occupation – were hoping for a Messiah to come. They didn't like the Romans; they'd prefer an independent Jewish kingdom where they'd be free to practice their religion and keep their wealth taken from them in taxes. However, they know who has the power. Should the popularity of Jesus lead to an uprising met by a full-scale Roman response, all they hold dear could be destroyed.

The people who line the streets that day wave palm branches; not native to Jerusalem but brought there from a more coastal town like Jericho. Palms were used in the Old Testament during nationalistic celebrations, like a Temple dedication. They were a symbol of God's power.

As Jesus passed, the people shouted *Hosanna*, meaning, “God, save us!” and *Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel*. To show them what kind of king he would be, Jesus rode by them sitting not on a war horse, but a humble donkey.

They were wanting, expecting, or maybe fearing a Messiah, a king who would come to overthrow their oppressors and restore the kingdom of old. What – I wonder – I are we wanting, expecting, or even fearing as we hold our palm branches today; branches that we have brought in from another place, not being native to Northeast Ohio; branches that we wave back and forth as we shout and sing *Hosanna*, God, save us! Do we desire a God who will display might by overthrowing powers that control or oppress us? Do we expect a God who will rescue us from personal, national or global distress? Or do we fear a God who may disrupt a comfortable status quo?

Jesus does not flee from anyone’s expectations for him. After entering the city and receiving this royal welcome, Jesus tells his disciples that his hour has now come, not asking (as in the other gospel stories) that it might pass from him. *What should I say, ‘Father save me from this time?’* he asks his disciples, *No, for this is the reason I have come to this time.*

Jesus has been about upending expectations and enlarging imaginations in John’s gospel. It began with the word becoming flesh: God’s creative, spiritual, ineffable power that animates and energizes all of creation took on human form among us, with us, as one of us. He showed us God’s abundance in turning water to wine and feeding thousands of people from one boy’s meal. He gave living water to a Samaritan woman at the well, and sight to a man who had been born blind. He allowed Mary to stoop down and wash his feet with perfume and will bend down himself to wash the feet of his disciples.

If we are going to see God’s glory in this Messiah, in this kind of king, we are going to need new expectations, new hearts, new eyes. We will need to dispose of our desire to gain more power, because Jesus shows us he is powerless to stave off death. We will need to place hope not in the ways of violence that control and oppress, but in the gracious gift of life renewed for all who simply believe.

If we are going to wave our palm branches this Sunday, we do so knowing that some in crowd that day would – in just a few short days – lay them down and abandon Jesus in his time of need. If we are going to shout *Hosanna*, “God, save us!” we remember how quickly the shouts turned to “Crucify him!” The desire for

a Messiah who will conquer our enemies is common to us all, but what happens when this king is different from what we expect? Do we lay down our palms and hide; do we choose nation or emperor over this different kind of king?

For the tens of thousands of Orthodox Christians who continue to escape each day from war and destruction in Ukraine, Easter will come on April 24, one week later than the date we celebrate on our Western liturgical calendars. For them, Holy Week will be spent in a foreign land, away from their cities and towns that have been bombed, butchered and barricaded; now in the homes of strangers or refugee centers. When they think of the path that Jesus follows – from the road into Jerusalem to the Upper Room, from the Garden of Gethsemane to Golgotha, from the cross to the grave – the reality of death will be front-of-mind.

In a place like Ukraine, it cannot be difficult to imagine how someone like Jesus – who was innocent of his accused crimes but tortured and killed, nonetheless – would have met this horrible fate. In John's account, Jesus – still wearing the purple robe and crown of thorns – carries the cross himself. As a final mark of humiliation, the Romans force him to bear the instrument of his own death. A sign, a public notice, is placed above him – written in Latin, Greek, and Aramaic, so that the whole world would be able to see – that here was Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews. The word that had become flesh, from a humble family in a little-known town, is now a King, known to the entire world. Not one as the people might have wanted, or expected, or even feared, but in the way God – Creator and Lord of all things – chose to be revealed.

Upon his entry to Jerusalem on the donkey's back, his sandaled feet dragging in the dusty road, Jesus tells one of his shortest but most poignant parables. *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies*, Jesus says to his disciples, *it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

Little, if – indeed – any, of the suffering that goes on in this world is redemptive. We are amazed at the courage and resilience of the Ukrainian people in the face of this brutal and unjust invasion by Russia. We marvel at how surrounding nations have stepped up to provide welcome for the millions of refugees crossing their borders. And we applaud people around the world who have donated to help. But there is no good explanation for this suffering.

In a similar way, we cannot – ourselves – imagine a justification for Jesus' suffering and death. We know, living as we do on the other side of the resurrection, that his seed – planted in the soil of the grave – produced abundant fruit. In dying,

Jesus destroyed the power of death. In rising again, he offers us life abundant and eternal. These are gifts of grace that we could never earn.

Why must we linger so long – in John’s gospel – on this story of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus? Why dig so deeply into who was at fault; which parties conspired and colluded to bring charges and carry out crucifixion?

Maybe it is because we are so prone to ignore our complicity in those systems that lead to suffering; because the truth of loving others despite the cost is so often clouded. In the story of the passion, we are shown that God’s capacity to forgive is greater than the human tendency to betray; that true love is not meant to be manipulative but self-giving.

During this Holy Week, maybe what we need to give up most is our expectations; for we continue to believe (even if we profess otherwise) that might makes right; that power always partners with violence. God, in Christ – the world made flesh – shows us a different way. The forces of death and destruction are best confronted by those who willing to give of themselves for the sake of others, stand in the breach, and open up hearts and hands for the sake of justice.

So, as we walk this road with Jesus, let us remember that he came to be with us, among us, and for us; not for his own sake, but that – through him – that good fruit might grow. And so, for this king that we never expected to come, we give thanks. Amen.