

## ***Palms to Ashes***

April 13, 2014: Sixth Sunday in Lent – Palm/Passion Sunday

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Matthew 21:1–11 and 27:11–31

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### **I. Introduction**

As you heard in our lectionary readings, Palm Sunday is the most ironic Sunday of our year with some very profound tensions. It's ironic because of course on this day, Jesus enters Jerusalem triumphant as the king that he is. The one who proclaimed that in-breaking of the kingdom of God. On this day he enters into the Holy City and the crowds go crazy welcoming him as the savior. The crowds, of course, are completely correct and completely wrong at exactly the same time because Jesus is king, but not the king they're assuming he is. Jesus is the one who ushers in the kingdom of God, but it's not the kingdom that they're expecting.

So today we come together celebrating the power and glory of God in this triumphant procession and acknowledging at the same moment our complete inability to understand what that is about. Palm Sunday sums up the week that we are entering into which is the week that defines who we are as a community of faith. It's a week in which we affirm that as Christians we are not following merely a wise man or a great leader, but we follow the Holy One, and we follow the Holy One along a path that none of us really wants to go on.

### **II. Repentance**

We see this immediately in the *Matthew* story because Matthew follows this story, the triumphal entry, with Jesus immediately turning to overthrow the money changers in the temple. Then he enters into a series of parables that are about how

the religious community, the religious leaders in Jerusalem have failed to be obedient to their call. So that just at the moment when everybody expected Jesus to start criticizing the Romans and start fomenting revolt, Jesus starts off alienating the exact people he needs on his side. Instead of placing blame for the people's woes where they want to hear it placed on those nasty Romans, Jesus challenges the people to look at themselves, to look at the way they're living out their faith life, and to start looking at the brokenness and hypocrisy that's found there.

Well, that's really not a good way to make friends and influence people, and if Jesus had been taking other people's advice, he would probably have found a different way to engage. Any American leader could've told Jesus about how the crowds would respond to criticism and to an invitation to do some self-reflection on their own brokenness and sinfulness and to engage in the process of repentance. Our politicians realized long ago that they would never get elected if they invited us to engage in the process of self-awareness. They get elected by finding other folks to blame for our problems rather than inviting us to start the journey by looking at ourselves. Amen?

And yet Palm Sunday is an invitation to do exactly that; as a matter of fact, all of Lent has been an invitation to do exactly that. To take a look at ourselves and rather than projecting all of the problems that we have around on the people and forces around us, to start the process of looking at ourselves, to be honest about our own places of brokenness and our own failings, and to start the healing journey there.

### **III. Crucifixion**

If self-reflection wasn't bad enough, all of Palm Sunday is pointing ultimately to that journey to the cross that we will walk with Jesus this week. The point here is loud and clear from all of the gospels that the death of Jesus on the cross is an integral part of God's plan to bring about salvation and wholeness. It is not just an accident; it is not an unfortunate necessity that we've got to work through, that somehow God's work on the cross is absolutely essential for us if we are going to experience the new life of the resurrection.

This flies in the face of everything that we cling to in our society. This self-emptying that Jesus engages in on the cross is the hardest truth that we have got to appropriate as God's disciples. Saint Paul said this from the get-go on his way to the Corinthians: that preaching Christ crucified is not a good evangelical tool if we want to attract people to the faith, nobody wants to hear that. We resist with tooth and nail, the need to move into that place of darkness, of death, of uncertainty and yet, Palm Sunday and Holy Week will not let us ignore the fact that that is how God's will gets worked out.

#### **IV. Darkness**

In her new book, Anglican priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "When I look around the world today, it seems clear to me that eliminating darkness is pretty high on the human agenda. Not just physical darkness, but also metaphysical darkness, which includes psychological, emotional, relational, and spiritual darkness." Darkness she says, "Is a short hand for anything that scares me, that I want no part of, either because I am not sure that I have the resources to survive it or because I don't want to find out." And so we find every means we can to ignore and to push aside the

reality of the crucifixion through self-help books, through consumerism, even through religion.

Reverend Taylor writes about what she calls, I love this phrase, “Full solar spirituality” because she says it focuses in staying in the light of God around the clock, both absorbing and reflecting the sunny side of faith. That’s a faith that is always there to tell us that God doesn’t put anything on us that we can’t carry, and that if we have faith that’s strong enough, all of the hurt and pain will go away.

Palm Sunday and Passion Week invite us to a deeper understanding of what our relationship with God is about. An understanding that invites us to live into and be present in the place of suffering, and death, the place of self-reflection and repentance in the knowledge that we’ve got to move through that experience, to be freed up to experience the new life that God wants to offer us in the resurrection. Reverend Taylor writes, “I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again so that there is only one logical conclusion that I can draw. That I need the darkness as much as I need the light.”

## **V. Conclusion**

We have a wonderful tradition of taking the Palms that we wave on Palm Sunday every year and storing them and next year as lent approaches, burning them and using them as the ashes as we prepare again for our Lenten journey. That’s a wonderful metaphor for what this week is about, starting off with the praise and the celebration of a triumphant God and then moving through the process of burning those soft palms, moving through the period of death, of grief, of self-reflection, of

repentance in order to create the space for God to bring us into the light of the resurrection glory of Christ.

So I want to invite you this week to engage fully in that process, to live through the services of Maundy Thursday, of Good Friday, both here, the Seven Last Words service during the day and over at Wesley on Friday night and if you can't do those, to find ways through our Lenten devotional or other means to live through the cross this week as we prepare ourselves to engage with joy and power the miracle of the resurrection next Sunday.

Amen.