

Sermons at St. Luke's

A homily preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Palm Sunday, April 5, 2009.

Welcome to Holy Week. It is interesting that March Madness and the liturgy of college basketball tournaments will end just as the liturgy of the church is reaching a fever pitch. For all you church fans out there, this week is the big event. When we listen to the Gospel lessons for this Palm Sunday, this Passion Sunday, I am wishing we had a sports style commentator to shout, “the crowd's going wild!” The crowds who witness Jesus entering Jerusalem on a colt cry “hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!” as if Jesus were a conquering hero. Only days later, the crowd chants “Crucify him! Crucify him!” denouncing Jesus, declaring him a failure, a loser. The crowd has gone wild indeed. Is there any good news on this Sunday of Christ's passion, Christ's suffering and death?

The cry of, “Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest,” is familiar to many of us. We say or sing it each Sunday as part of the Eucharist celebration. It was familiar to the crowds as well, a quotation from the psalms. Literally, the word, “Hosanna” means “please, save.” “Please, help.” But it had come to be more of a word of praise, similar to Hallelujah. It was an ecstatic cheer directed at the divine giver of help and salvation. The crowd perhaps quoted the psalm, because it brought to mind the spirit of asking for deliverance from one's enemies. It recalled the sense of begging for victory over oppression. Jesus rode into town, and the crowds went wild, because here was their most valuable player, here was their star who was going to win the game and end the losing streak against their oppressors. What the crowds failed to recognize was that Jesus was not coming to save them in the way they expected. Jesus was not riding into town to defeat the empire. Jesus was riding into town to defeat sin. When the crowd did not get what they wanted, they were easily convinced to turn on Jesus, to support his execution, to cheer his death. Meanwhile, his faithful followers were too frightened to do much. They fell asleep with him in the garden. They deserted him at the cross. They denied having known him. In some ways, the story we hear on Palm Sunday is the story of the best of intentions and the worst of actions. The crowds intended to support Jesus. The disciples intended to stay by his side even unto death. But in the end, what actually happened was betrayal, injustice, torture, execution, and desertion. Jesus endured the worst of what human beings can do to each other.

Someone once said, “we have met the enemy and they are us.” With friends like Peter and Judas Iscariot, with friends who betray you and deny knowing you, who needs enemies? Palm Sunday reminds us of the depths to which we human beings have sunk, in spite of ourselves. How many of us have betrayed someone? How many of us have stood by while someone else was treated unjustly? How many of us have not told the truth so as to avoid trouble? How many of us have mocked another person out of spite? How many of us have been an unjust judge of his neighbor? How many of us have abandoned a friend? How many of us feel, as the psalmist does, useless like a broken pot, afraid of the wildness of the crowd? How many of us have gone along with the crowd and done things we are not proud of? We can see our ourselves in the unruly crowd. We can see ourselves in the so-called friends of Jesus. We can see ourselves amongst the soldiers who are just following orders. We have met the enemy, and they are us. We can be our own worst enemies sometimes. In spite of our best intentions to follow Christ and to love each other, we can still cause a lot of suffering and pain. And if we do not do it personally, we've seen it happening around us and we feel helpless to intervene.

What do we say on a passion Sunday, a Sunday of suffering and death? How can we dare to

praise God on a day like this? It feels downright hypocritical to hear how we put the son of God on a cross and then turn around and say, "Yay God!" How can we declare the greatness of the Lord when we see so clearly our own brokenness and ability to hurt each other? Do you remember what Hosanna actually means? It means "Help, please!" "Please, save." "Please come to our rescue." Perhaps our greatest word of praise is a call for help. Our greatest affirmation of the greatness of God is a cry for God's assistance, because God is great enough, God is generous enough to help us, even at our worst. On this Passion Sunday, we see how Jesus suffered the worst we could give. Jesus endured the depths of our sin, and yet he promised to meet us on the other side. God came to be human with us, willing to walk with us in our sin so that we might learn another way, so that we might be saved from the worst parts of our human nature.

How do we praise God? We cry Hosanna, Hosanna. Please, help. All glory, laud, and honor to thee redeemer king, not because you're going to win the big game for us but because you're going to keep us from losing the gift of life. You did not come to defeat our enemies. You came to show us how to love our enemies. You did not come to trample the opposition. You came to oppose the evil that distorts our goodness and divides us from each other and from God.

This day of our Lord's suffering is a day to praise. Not with jubilant alleluias but with mournful hosannas. Help, please! Please save! As the psalmist says, our times are in your hand, O Lord. Save us from the hand of our enemies, save us from ourselves. Make your face to shine upon your servant and in your loving-kindness, hosanna, save us. Today is a day to shout Hosanna, not in hopes of victory but in hopes of forgiveness. Today is a day to cast our cloaks upon the road so that we might clothe ourselves with Christ. Today is a day to declare all we have done wrong, to confess and throw down the garments of sin that Christ might shelter us with God's kindness and love. Praise the Lord, brothers and sisters. Adore the God of infinite goodness and mercy by admitting our profound need for grace. Hosanna. Hosanna, O highest God. Forgive us and save us.