

Stopping the Nonsense

Ever found yourself laughing at a joke that you really didn't find funny? What about watching the final episode of a television show you've never really followed? Have you ever stood at the end of a performance, because it seemed like everyone else was moving from their seats to their feet?

It is easy to get caught up in the crowd, to act or more truly, react, based on those around us is just as it is easy to want this day to only be Palm Sunday. Seen apart from the rest of the story the triumphant entry seems like the signal to begin the Easter celebration! Yet moving from palms to empty tomb leaves the soul empty, just as most every experience which is based on crowd following does.

Today is Palm/Passion Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. The term Holy Week can create confusion, as the word holy simply means "to set apart." If the church, and your pastor, calls you to set a week apart, what is it to be set apart for? Why this week, why such a call to immerse ourselves in this part of the Biblical story? Because it is not in that which is easy in which faith and hope grow, it is the power and promise of God seen in the light and midst of earth's sorrow and suffering that things eternal, like the soul, become not only apparent but take their rightful place as that which is significant, that which seeking become priority, that which shapes us. It is in our willingness to enter fully into Holy Week, fully into the story, that we come to know the true promise of God. For me this is captured in a chorus of the contemporary Christian song "Held":

*This is what it means to be held. How it feels when the sacred is torn
from your life and you survive. This is what it is to be loved. And to
know that the promise was when everything fell we'd be held.*

The recounting of the last week of Jesus' life tells of one who trusted completely in that promise, to be held. Jesus did not expect or seek out a God who made things easy for him. He did not, though he struggled with the desire in the garden, ask that God save his physical life. His desire was that the love, will and way of God be embraced and shared. That his life might display and others might accept that to be held by God was and is always enough.

The Gospel story which we shared today happened as Passover was occurring. One can easily imagine the brightly colored clothes and the power that comes when we move out of our often small and isolated circles and join in the celebration of something beyond in community. It is likely that the excitement of the disciples was palpable, they had longed for this, for three years they had given up life as they knew it for this. As the crowds pressed they may have encouraged that everything possible to make this a royal procession happen. Grapping palm branches to wave, draping their cloaks on the donkey's back.

The desire of the crowd was apparent in their cries "Hosanna" means "save us, save us now". "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" was a popular greeting shared between pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for the festival. Jesus was seen as one of their own, with the potential to lead a revolution which would free them from their current situation.

This is a story that does not end. Today the question of who is Jesus and what does Jesus mean in my life today echoes on. The call for “someone” to save us not only echoes today, it has intensified. We cry out for the solution to our world’s economic problems and the fear they instill, rather or not one has yet to be personally effected. It is easy to hope for and wish out loud that the stock market would rise, that investments would be stabilized, that jobs would reappear and everything would be as it was. How like the call of the first Palm Sunday crowd.

The truth is that surrendering to such calls and yearnings drowns us in selffulness. Though we come together as a crowd, we pull away from true community and seek to simply protect our own. Just as when the palm branch is cut from the tree it begins to die, so when we join the crowd rather than seek God, death takes hold. Many of the palm bearers had a shallow love for Jesus, and based entirely on their hope of what exciting things he could do for them. When the excitement and crowd faded so did their cries, and as Jesus chose to be about God’s purposes rather than the peoples, the cries changed to shouts; the words from greeting, acknowledgement and hope to hate and death.

The story of the palms continues to become the story of one who did not accept the adulation and follow the expectations of the crowd but who instead talked of suffering and death. Then come the Three Great Days, set aside since the fourth century as a unit marking the beginning and the heart of the church year.

Thursday was the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. This was the day when Jesus washed his disciples' feet and "took bread .. ." saying, "Do this in remembrance of me."

On Friday Christ was crucified.

Saturday evening, counting as the Jews did from sundown to sundown, began the first day of the week, the day of resurrection. Holy Week concludes with the celebration of the resurrection.

To skip from Palm to Easter denies that we need to celebrate the victory that Christ has brought us over sin and death in light of the reality of pain, suffering and sorrow. We also need to come to terms with sin and evil—with the pain in the way of the cross. The ways in which we live either embraces and shares in God’s love or denies it. Holy Week reminds us that we have not yet learned very well how to be a community of faith with all of creation in the hard times.

It calls us to develop such hearts for God alone that the ways of the crowds cannot draw us in, yet love for all in Christ’s name defines the very essence of who and whose we are. It calls us into radical, world changing faith knowing that we need not worry about self, for we are held in the palm of God’s hand.