

Palm Sunday April 9, 2017
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Matthew 26:14-27:66

On Palm Sunday we transition out of Lent – a time when we have considered how we might overcome the obstacles we create that keep us from living fully into faithful relationship with God. We emerge from this contemplative quiet into the noisy crowd that welcomes Jesus into Jerusalem. It feels good to walk around waving our palm fronds, singing a familiar hymn of praise, and boldly declaring Jesus to be the Redeemer King for whom we have been waiting. After the austerity of Lent, we welcome the opportunity to participate in this lively gathering. We follow Jesus into Jerusalem on a journey where, as our collect reminds us, Jesus will soon suffer death on the cross, and we ask God “that we might walk in the way of his suffering and also share in his resurrection.” In order to participate in the joy of new life we must first immerse ourselves into the pain and suffering that leads to that joy.

Our Palm Sunday observance is something of a liturgical roller coaster. After the deliriously joyful celebration of Jesus entering Jerusalem, we are suddenly jolted into the Passion Gospel where we all take part in the narrative.

“Let him be crucified.....let him be crucified.” It is terrible to speak these words out loud, – and yet every year on this day we find ourselves doing just that. And even though we know it’s coming, somehow, we still seem to be caught off guard when we hear these words pass our lips. When we articulate the call to execute Jesus we cannot help but feel complicit in this horrendous act. In today’s adaptation from Matthew’s Gospel we also become Judas the betrayer, Peter the denier, and the chief priests bringing their plot to fruition. Taking on these roles forces us to assume accountability for these unbearable acts against our beloved Jesus.

Each of these uncomfortable scenes keeps us mindful that it is *all* of humanity and not just specific individuals or a finite group of protesters that make Jesus' gift of forgiveness and redemption necessary in the first place.

As we revisit the events of Holy Week each year, we do so from the vantage point of our own flawed humanity, but at the same time we can also try to contemplate a different perspective throughout our journey. The reading from Philippians begins, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." (*Philippians 2:5*) So how might Jesus experience his entry into Jerusalem? What is going through his mind during his trial before Pilate? How does Jesus internalize his circumstances as he hangs upon the cross? Jesus has always known what will happen to him in Jerusalem. He is aware that the palm-laying crowd's show of devotion does not signify a shift in that reality. We can be confident that Jesus loves the crowds who greet him – not because of their extravagant welcome, but because of his love and compassion for all humanity.

The scene changes and we find ourselves at the Last Supper, then as witnesses to the arrest, and finally in the midst of the crowd watching as Pilate interrogates Jesus. His destiny is unfolding just as Jesus always knew that it would. The once devoted crowd turns on him, calling for his execution. Does Jesus now feel disappointment, sorrow and even apprehension? While he always anticipated that it would unfold like this, in the actual moment he probably does feel these gut-wrenching emotions in his heart. But the love he has for these people, that we can so easily imagine in his triumphant entry, has not changed. It is only because of his unquenchable love for all humanity that he will go through the ordeal necessary to reach the final, joyous conclusion. This divine love is offered to every person present that day, and this love continues to be freely offered to each one of us as we faithfully recall these events.

Our journey continues all the way to the cross, a stark reminder of what lies ahead when we come to Good Friday. Shortly before he dies we listen as Jesus cries with a loud voice, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” This is the moment that Jesus plunges fully into the depths of human misery. This is the place where we all find ourselves at times – feeling completely on our own, removed from the presence of God. This is the sense of estrangement that Jesus has come to heal in us. We instinctively know that God Incarnate cannot be separated from God, but the truth is that none of us is ever excluded from the presence of our Divine Creator. Jesus demonstrates this truth to us through his own poignant suffering

During this most holy of weeks we will accompany Jesus during the final days of his earthly life. Let us open our hearts and minds to consider how Jesus might regard these events as they unfold, remembering that his unwavering love for us undergirds everything we see, hear and feel. It is only by traveling to the depths of despair we counter during this week that we are able to discover unexpected joy when we finally arrive at the empty tomb.