

The First Hurrah

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“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” -- Mark 11:9

Just for the record, when it comes to Palm Sunday, you spoke and I listened. You told me, a few years ago, that the way we were observing Palm Sunday was confusing and awkward. We'd start, as we started this morning, with a palm procession led by the children, with its upbeat music and smiling faces and gentle chaos, but then, after Children's Time, the mood of the service would abruptly turn somber as we together would read the passion narrative, which recounts the last dark days of Jesus's earthly life. The contrast was jarring, especially if the choir's music drew us back to the first part of the service. Back and forth we'd go through the service, swaying from one mood to its opposite and then back again, rather like someone making his way home after a night at the local watering hole.

I freely acknowledge the problem and sensed it long before you brought it to my attention. I felt it years ago when I sat where you're sitting this morning, and my college church observed Palm-Passion Sunday with the same double-barreled name and liturgical aim: to celebrate the joyous entry of Jesus into Jerusalem at the beginning, and to commemorate the passion of Jesus at the end. It was a liturgical twofer – two services riveted together, never, in my estimate, entirely successfully.

So why, you might be asking, did I import such a Sphinx-like creature into our worship at Faith? The answer's quite simple: Sunday. As our lives have become busier and busier and the time which we can set aside for worship has become smaller and smaller, more and more of our worship has been moved from the several days of Holy Week to the one day of Sunday that opens it. As we ministers watched the numbers dwindle at Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday services – those services at which the Jesus story after his entry into Jerusalem would be read – we came to believe that however awkward it might feel, cramming the passion narrative into the one service when we could count on a fair number was the better option, and so we took it.

We took it because we believed – and I still believe – that folks who miss the passion part of the story are missing an important part of the whole story. Between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday lies much of the drama for which Easter is the climax, and the only way for many of you to hear that part of the story was for you to hear it on the Sunday before Easter, and thus Palm-Passion Sunday was born.

Today it's simply Palm Sunday, and for the sake of liturgical clarity we've returned to the pattern of worship that feels more familiar and coherent to many of us. We acknowledge the risk, however, that a good number of you will go from what we think is the happy acclamation of “Hosanna!” today to the certainly happy acclamation of “Hallelujah!” next week, glossing the grim bits in between.

And so, again for the record, let me urge you not to skip Holy Week here at Faith. We've made it as user-friendly as we reasonably can, with only two special services, but they are indeed special and worth your time and attention.

This Thursday, we will read the passion narrative as it is found in the Gospel of

Mark. We'll do so in the context of a simple Communion and Tenebrae service in the Social Hall at 7:30. If you'd like to join us for a simple meal beforehand, please sign up before you leave church today.

And the next day, Good Friday, we will return here to the sanctuary at noon to mark the Stations of the Cross, when we focus our attention and direct our imagination specifically to the trial, execution, and burial of Jesus. Donna Nedrow and the members of our Worship Ministry will construct fourteen stations around this room, and Dr. Kimberly Whitney and I will guide our meditations on those last harrowing hours of Jesus's life using those stations as guide posts. That service should last about an hour.

So I encourage you to participate in both of these services if you're able to, but at least one of them. You need to be reminded, as we all do, of the darkness that lies at the center of the Christian story – a darkness for which we, through our spiritual ancestors, are responsible and in which we participate. The answer to the question posed by the old Negro spiritual, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" is "Yes, we were there, represented by people as misguided, as sinful, and as wretched as we ourselves continue to be," and the passion narrative won't let us forget that unhappy fact.

Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, all four of the New Testament's evangelists preserve some version of the last painful days of Jesus's physical life on earth, and they did so, I believe, to save his story from glibness and a false cheeriness. "Tell me the stories of Jesus" is another of those wonderfully singable gospel hymns that recounts the beautiful and tranquil and delightful in the story of Jesus, all of which are present in abundance.

But the story of Jesus – the true story of Jesus – is not a story of unmitigated fair skies, because such a story would not be true to life, and the story of Jesus, above all else, is the story of true life – full life, abundant life, eternal life – which includes facing and ultimately overcoming all of those forces of darkness that drain true life of its truth and meaning and purpose.

The story of Jesus is a serious story told by the church, that institution the poet Philip Larkin called "a serious house on serious earth," and it's hard to get more serious than crucifixion or betrayal or desertion or perjury or abuse of power or many of the other elements found in what Paul Harvey might call "the rest of the story."

And today is the opening scene of that narrative. Today we celebrate with the crowds who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem during the Jewish celebration of Passover. We used to think – and we preachers used to say – that the crowd who shouted "Hosanna!" was the same crowd, five days later, crying "Crucify him!" and many a sermon has been preached on the fickleness of the herd mentality. I've preached a few of them myself.

And there is certainly some truth in recognizing the inconstancy of the human heart. When our heroes let us down, we often turn on them with a vengeance, and the hero who could once do no wrong is now the arch-villain of our bitter disappointment. I'm reminded of the reaction of some Cavs fans when LeBron James signed a contract with the Miami Heat in 2010. Selfish, heartless, callous, and cowardly betrayal were some of the more preachable terms used to describe James's decision, but all of that bitter estrangement was apparently forgotten when James returned to Cleveland four years later to the rapturous designation "The King."

So yes, it is possible that some of that flash mob who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday were in the howling mob who later cried for his crucifixion. But as New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan have pointed out, it's very likely that what we are witnessing on Palm Sunday is less the vaporous enthusiasm of a changeable crowd and more a bit of calculated street theater designed to bring simmering conflicts to the boil.

Jesus knew exactly what he was doing by riding into the capital city on a donkey as the one coming in the name of the Lord. He was a leader who was not coming in the name of the emperor, and in Roman-occupied Judea, all leaders derived their power and exercised their authority in the name of the emperor. There was no room for alternative allegiances among Rome's subjected people, and by arranging his own parade into town, as Jesus did, he put himself squarely in the cross-hairs of lethal power. He knew that, he knew what the likely outcome would be, and he did it anyway. Jesus took up his cross long before Good Friday.

And he did so for our sake. He did so for the sake of people who were spiritually lost and physically oppressed in the world of power politics. This first hurrah, this first unmistakably public defiance of imperial power, sets the stage for everything that follows. No longer is Jesus healing the blind and lame and teaching about the lilies of the field out in the sticks of Galilee; he's brought his message and his movement to the center of Jewish political life and the center of Roman political life for the province of Judea, where his teachings, his lifestyle, his charisma, and his leadership can no longer be ignored or dismissed by those in power. Jesus, as Robert's Rules of Order would put it, is calling the question: the world's way or God's way? To whom will ordinary women and men give their ultimate allegiance – God or Caesar? That's the question Jesus's words and actions will make explicit, starting with his very public entry into Jerusalem. The itinerant rabbi has become a political as well as religious force to be reckoned with, and that reckoning will be brutal.

But it will not be final. This first hurrah of the followers of Jesus will not be their last. The colluded powers of entrenched Jewish leadership and brutal Roman justice will have their way with Jesus's physical body, oblivious to the fact that his spiritual body was already taking shape in the form of his church. The second hurrah of Jesus's followers will be their rejoicing on Easter morning when they realize that Jesus is no longer among the dead. The state's most powerful weapon – the death penalty – had been overcome by a more powerful weapon, the weapon of divine love. In the clash of forces in the week following Palm Sunday, brute force met soul force, and you and I and the billions of our Christian siblings are the living proof that soul force won.

Where are Caesar's followers today? Where are those mighty empires who sought to impose by force the loyalty that can be achieved only through the freedom of love? As far back as human history can take us, we see a path littered with the broken dreams and schemes of those who tried Caesar's way, the way of force, of intimidation, of exploitation, of manipulation. The Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans – even the church itself took up Constantine's sword and fashioned itself into a Holy Roman Empire – and where are they all now? In museums and textbooks to the extent that they exist at all.

And where is the body of Christ? In every corner of the globe, oppressed and persecuted in places like Iraq and Egypt and North Korea, declining in places like western Europe, holding steady in places like the United States, but thriving in places like South Africa and Latin America.

And appearances notwithstanding, the church of Jesus Christ has not yet shouted its last hurrah. Palm Sunday then or Palm Sunday now is not, we believe, the last time we welcome God's anointed to a violent and troubled world. Christians look not backward to the first Palm Sunday nor forward only to next Sunday's celebration of life over death, but rather we look all the way to the end of time itself, and the end of this world as we know it, to that time envisioned by prophets and held in trust for us by the Lamb of God himself. That is earth's last hurrah, the last time we welcome or will need to welcome God Incarnate into our midst, for God will be all in all.

That time is not yet and we know it. But we believe in it, long for it, and work toward it, trusting that our efforts are not in vain. We have seen the realm of God in the face of the Christ, and we fear neither the ravages of time nor what awaits when time shall be no more.

Holy Week, friends, is the annual reminder to Christians not to be seduced by Hollywood, New York, or D.C. Holy Week reminds us that we do not believe in happily-ever-after fairy tales, for that is not the world in which we live or are called to serve. Those who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem then did not see the end of suffering and death, and neither will those who welcome Jesus into their lives today. Jesus did not promise his followers an easy life, he promised them eternal life, and it is toward that life that we set our faces and direct our lives, trusting that the God who has brought us this far will be with us to the end.