

PALM SUNDAY - 2003
Rev'd. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Marcus Borg talks about Palm Sunday in this way: "The meaning of the riding into Jerusalem becomes clear when we realize that Jesus was intentionally enacting a passage from Zechariah. He chose a known symbol to say that the Kingdom he spoke of was one of peace, not war. His entry was a planned political demonstration, an appeal to the religious and political people of the city that God's way was still open. He could see that the people were headed for war and destruction. It implied that an alternative existed." (Synthesis, 2003)

So here we are on Palm Sunday. The drama of Holy Week begins to unfold once again. What is the alternative that it presents us with today? Marion Hatchett (author of the Commentary on the Prayer Book) says that there is "a bipolar nature of today." We are faced with both Palm Sunday and the Passion Story. We need to remember that Palm Sunday is the subsidiary theme. Today, this week, is all about the Passion.

Note the multiple movements that exist today. We move from coronation to chaos, from celebration to despair, and from jubilation to suffering. Look at the movement in the crowd, the shouts change from, "Hosanna!" to "Crucify him!" Jesus moves from kingship to crucifixion. Today presses us to answer a question, "What kind of God do we worship?" Do we really understand how Jesus is at the heart of today?

Look at the power struggle that is taking place in the story. The power of violence is set over against the power of love. The crowd wanted a military and political hero. The cries for Barabbas later attest to this. He conformed more closely to what the crowd wanted. Jesus is not the military or political hero. He is the suffering servant. His path did not play well then, and it doesn't fit well today.

Note that the action is taking place in Jerusalem. Here we are at the capital seat, the heart of secular and religious power. Unfortunately, as so often happens in culture, religion has been co-opted by the secular. Jesus is about confrontation., He comes with a final challenge. God is trying to break in and Jesus is the agent of God's actions. Salvation is coming, despite us!

My New Testament professor in seminary, Reggie Fuller, use to say that the entry into the city was a prelude. He said we could sense the messianic enthusiasm of the multitude in the story. But elements of foreshadowing are evident. Here comes Jesus, riding on an ass, a hint of the humiliation of the cross. What the story tells us, as we read and listen further, is that it is only by becoming the suffering servant that Jesus becomes the king.

The liturgy of today moves us from this prelude to the heart of the Gospel, the Passion. Jesus prevails not through violence. He is actually a victim of violence. Jesus is going to the cross to save us. He does not rely on superior weapons, superb statesmanship or economic prowess. What we witness is the power of darkness overcoming the Son of light. The message of today can be easily lost in the midst of the crowd.

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But, oh! How we love a parade! I remember my first visit to Haddonfield. It was the fourth of July. We have one of the best parades that day I have ever seen! There is all that pomp and circumstance! The sights, sounds and smells stir the senses! Feelings are high. The crowd is happy! Flags fly everywhere. Is this what it was like for Jesus as he came into Jerusalem? I can easily imagine it being just this way!

But there is a terrible shift! The people go from a welcoming host, crying, "Hosanna!" to a frightening mob. The joy turns darkly to violence. The mood and cries change as well. Now we hear, "Crucify him!" The people admit their inability to see God's alternative to violence. Can we love God for what God does? Or do we still continue to insist that God do it our way? The alternative is placed before us, but we can't see it.

Palm Sunday asks us to pay attention to the story. We are invited to participate once again in the drama that is unfolding. There is, as always, an alternative. We can choose to ignore the story. I read this week a commentary in Synthesis that said there are five ways to have a bland, blah Easter. There were: be lazy; stick with your routine; focus on Easter as a secular holiday for the kids; don't reach out to others; and, don't remember a loved one who has died. Is this the alternative we want to choose?

Perhaps there is something else. Perhaps we can rediscover the power and meaning of this story. I would like to close this morning with a story that helps me understand this week. It comes from Henri Nouwen's, "Our Greatest Gift." Twins lay in the womb. The sister and brother carried on regular conversations with each other. One day, the sister said, "I believe there is life after birth!" The brother replied, "No way!" He continued, "This is a dark and cozy place. We get fed all the time. Everything we need is here!" The sister answered, "There must be something else, a place of light and freedom to move!" The brother retorted, "No way!" He fell silent.

After a while, the sister said, "I think there is a mother." The brother laughed and said, "A mother!" Are you kidding? I've never seen a mother. This is all we have. Why do you always want more? Be content with what you have." The sister replied, "But don't you feel those squeezes every once in a while? I think we are being prepared for something else." The brother snorted, and said, "Those squeezes are unpleasant and painful. So what! Why are they so special?" The sister pressed on, "I think we are getting ready for another place. It will be more beautiful than this and we will see mother face-to-face!" The brother was silent. He hoped that if he ignored sister, she would leave him alone.

This story invites us to think about the alternatives. We can think about death in a new way. That is what Jesus tells us. We can live this life as if it is all there is for us. We can say death is absurd or not even talk about it. Or we can choose an alternative. We can claim our childhood and be children of God. We can trust that death is painful, but it is a blessed passage that brings us face to face with God. The choice is always ours.

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**Let the journey continue for us. Let us move into the story of Holy Week once again.
Let us go to the cross ... with Jesus.**