

“FROM PALMS TO PASSION”

THE GOSPEL LESSON

Luke 19:28-40 After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them.

As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” They said, “The Lord needs it.”

Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

Do you remember M*A*S*H? I’m talking about the long running TV comedy series about a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital in Korea during the war. You remember, right?

In a 1974 episode, (season 3, episode 7), the doctor known as “Trapper” is diagnosed with a stomach ulcer. Although initially upset about having to deal with a hole in his gut, Trapper soon beams with joy when his bunkmate Hawkeye reminds him that according to Army regulations, Trapper was going home! They arrange a huge farewell party for him. But minutes before Trapper shows up for his party, he is informed by the Company Clerk, Radar, that the Army had recently changed its regulations and his ulcer would have to be treated right there in Korea. Trapper goes to the party anyway and allows the hilarity, festivity, and joy of the evening to proceed for a good long while until he’s asked to give a final speech, at which time he tells everyone the truth: he’s not going home after all.

But throughout the party, both Trapper and Radar have a look in their eyes that betrays the truth, if only anyone had looked close enough to notice. Trapper smiles and even laughs during the party, but it’s a bit muted and there is sadness in his eyes knowing that it was a nice party but it wasn’t going to end the way he had hoped or the way all the other partygoers were anticipating. I imagine, as Jesus rides into Jerusalem on that colt, he has a similar look of sadness in his eyes. He is riding toward his death, and he knows it all too well. The disciples should know it too; Jesus foretold his death to the twelve at least once before this day. But, they understood nothing, they didn’t grasp what Jesus said, so they are out there celebrating along with the rest. The multitudes are not those who will ultimately condemn Jesus to death, and so they enter into the hilarity, festivity, and joy of the parade in blissful ignorance.

They have heard Jesus’ word and deeds of power and have been profoundly moved, and they want to praise him. Like the disciples, they will disappear from the story when the going gets rough. In that parade, Jesus knows a joy mixed with sadness, celebration mingled with the knowledge that the story is not going to end the way anyone hoped or the way the parade-goers were anticipating. In less than a week, he would go from crowds shouting hosannas and waving palms to his abandonment, suffering, and death.

From palms to passion.

In the last weeks, like the multitudes, we too have heard Jesus’ word and deeds of power and have been profoundly moved. Let us not run when things get rough. If we run away from the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, we can never fully or deeply appreciate Easter morning.

This Holy Week, we can be with Jesus today, Palm Sunday, at the joyful parade with its underlying sadness, on Maundy Thursday at the Last Supper he shared with his beloved twelve, on Good Friday as he is nailed to the cross.

Some churches will also celebrate the Passion today, but that’s for me, that’s for later in the week—Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. While it’s an uncomfortable place to be, I want to spend time with this day of mixed emotions because life is like that.

The New York Times had an article last week titled, “The Stories That Bind.” The writer attempted to ask and answer the question, “What is the secret sauce that holds families together?” His conclusion? “The single most important thing you can do for your family [is to] develop a strong family narrative.”

Marshall Duke, a psychologist at Emory University says a healthy family narrative goes something like this:

‘Dear, let me tell you, we’ve had ups and downs in our family. We built a family business. Your grandfather was a pillar of the community. Your mother was on the board of the hospital. But we also had setbacks. You had an uncle who was arrested. We had a house burn down. Your father lost a job. But no matter what happened, we always stuck together as a family.’” Holy Week is the healthy Christian family narrative. It connects us to Christians of all ages; it goes from desolation to exultation, from deep grief to deep peace, from

abandonment to
ultimate oneness with
God.

I learned a new word recently. You might know it already. It's Chreaster. Chreasters are those who fill out the pews on Christmas and Easter. They will be out in force next Sunday, in churches everywhere. We will welcome those multitudes with joy. We will celebrate that they are a beloved part of this community and the community of God.

Some of them might tell us that they don't come to church at other times of the year because something is missing from the experience, and they would be right. We who are here now, who have been here during the season of Lent, know what it is, that secret missing ingredient, the secret sauce that holds the Christian family together.

They are missing the complete, healthy, family narrative. They go from Christmas to Easter—from high note to high note—and aren't here for the in-between stuff, the ups and downs. They aren't here for potlucks, post-Sandy thanksgiving, weekly coffee hours, church life planning, Lenten sacred suppers and pre-worship chat. They aren't here to help grieve when a beloved member dies, loses a job, gets sick, or worries about someone they love. They aren't here to celebrate when a new baby is born, a new job is found, healing happens, when hardship is overcome, or when there is good news to share.

They haven't shared times of prayer,

eating, singing, or hearing and telling stories. They haven't gone from palms to passion, only from joy to joy. Life isn't like that. The life of Jesus, our lives, the life of this church community—aren't only about birth and resurrection, but also about struggle and despair. As we retell the story of this last week of Jesus' life, we are reminding ourselves of the times when we too got through difficult times and come out the other side triumphant. We remind ourselves that Jesus' story is a human story, a healthy narrative of incredible endurance, strength, hope, and love that ends in glory.

Today, amid all the mixed emotions, we begin to mark Jesus' journey from palms to passion, from desolation to paradise, from mockery as King of the Jews to the kingdom of heaven, from suffering on the cross to the mystery of resurrection. This is a day, and a time, that the Lord has made. Let us lament and rejoice, be sad and be glad in it.

Amen.