

St. Paul's Congregational Church
 April 9, 2017, Palm Sunday
 The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Hosanna means help! Palm branches mean triumph. Jesus had become more of a king than the king. He brought what no king had brought before. The crowd didn't shout, "Hail, Son of David." Instead they called, "Save us, Son of David!"

The crowd saw hope riding past them. A little, maybe, like pressing in to hear Martin Luther King, Jr. – yearning for hope.

But Jesus was more: human categories no longer fit him. Matthew's gospel says it: he declares Jesus rode on a donkey and a colt, making the prophecies of Zechariah come true. This is the heart of Palm Sunday: the promise of the prophecies comes true; the promise of God, God incarnate, near enough to touch.

This Sunday is Passion Sunday too. We will hear the story today in our worship – a story with saving power. Be forewarned: you will reach the end not quite the same as you were at the beginning.

Maybe your change will come through hearing something unfamiliar: in the midst of all those familiar details a phrase or a person that jumps out from the story in a new way – like Pilate's wife, who dreamed a warning that might have saved Jesus, or the slave of the high priest, the only one whose blood was shed in Gethsemane, or the cataclysm that followed Jesus' last breath, when not only the sacred curtain of the temple was torn in two, but the bodies of saints who had died were raised, to wait in suspended expectation for the resurrection.

The sacred story becomes a mirror that tells more truth about you than the brightly-lit looking glass where you encountered yourself this morning. You meet the part of yourself that believes, and the part of yourself that doesn't. The part of you that finds it symbolic and interesting that the temple curtain was torn, but not very likely a real occurrence. The part of you ready to see another human being as entirely enemy. You see your selves, a little more clearly: the selves that satisfy us and the selves that we hide from.

The story puts us there, in the crowd that watched Jesus of Nazareth that strange wandering rabbi who upset so many people and filled so many with passion. We are among those who scapegoated him, and we are among those who wept when he took that dreadful walk to Golgotha.

The story changes us when we read it closely, especially with companions. It takes us, just as we are, and confronts us together. Waiting for relief from despair. Waiting for someone to see our souls and love us as we are. Waiting for life, and love, and laughter, and new hope. Waiting, together, for the hope of the ages to arrive — and holding one another, in heart-rending belief, when even eternal hope dies on the cross of humankind's inhumanity.

But all of these events, all of these days, really do depend on each other for their meaning – going directly from the celebration, though bittersweet, of Palm Sunday to the celebration of Easter doesn't allow each of these to make sense – we have to experience

the whole journey, the wonderful highs and the terrible lows of it, to “get it” I think. And certainly we all do all we can to avoid pain – that’s human – and dealing with the incredible discordance of the events of Holy Week beginning with this loud and celebratory parade is hard. But we do it – and we do it together.

Ann Weems has written a poem – Holy Week – listen to her words:

Holy is the week...

Holy, consecrated, belonging to God....

We move from hosannas to horror

 With the predictable ease

 Of those who know not what they do.

Our hosannas sung,

 Our palms waved,

Let us go with passion into this week.

It is a time to curse fig trees that do not yield fruit.

It is a time to cleanse our temples of any blasphemy.

It is a time to greet Jesus as the Lord’s Anointed One,

 To lavishly break our alabaster

 And pour perfume out for him

 Without counting the cost.

It is a time for preparation...

The time to give thanks and break bread is upon us.

The time to give thanks and drink of the cup is imminent.

Eat. Drink. Remember.

On this night of nights, each one must ask,

 As we dip our bread in the wine,

 Is it I?

And on that darkest of days, each of us must stand

 Beneath the tree

And watch the dying

 If we are to be there

When the stone is rolled away.

The only road to Easter morning

 Is through the unrelenting shadows of that Friday

Only then will the alleluias be sung

 Only then will the dancing begin.

Let us travel that road together – let us live in the hope this week brings. And now, let us pray: God, on this day of hosannas and of horror, help me remember that you are large enough to contain my hope, my joy, my fear, my despair — with room enough for the passion of every fellow creature and all creation. Lead me through this Holy Week with “Hosanna” on my lips: “Save us, Living Word of God!” Amen.

“Holy Week” by Ann Weems – from *Kneeling in Jerusalem, 1992*

Credit also to “Hosannas and Horror” by the Rev. Dr. John A. Nelson from *Spirited Wednesday*, a weekly devotional from the people of the Connecticut Conference, United Church of Christ.