

Sermon for Palm Sunday 2011 – “Cross-Roads”

Text: Matthew 21:1-11; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Matthew 26:45-54; Matthew 27:11-54

There's always a struggle in how best to describe the last Sunday before Easter – known alternatively as Palm and Passion Sunday.

Which is it? Palm or Passion? Is it neither? Or, is it something else entirely? Why not both?

I would have to go with both – because to do so – is to wrap our arms around the painful truths of life itself. Truths that we all know and acknowledge, when we're most honest about who we are, as people on pilgrimage in a broken world. Truths that are bigger than we realize and that threaten to steal the thunder out of any sermon, or reflection for today. The truth that our lives are a constant collision between joyous victory with all of its giddy hope and the crushing terror of the cross. The truth of the great despair, guilt, and disappointments – if not the death and destruction – that often haunt us.

Christianity turns on this axis of the opposing worlds of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and the brutality of His shameful execution. As Christians, we're a peculiar bunch because of our propensity to probe the very depths of despair and talk about hope at the same time. We dare to look directly into the face of suffering, with an unflinching gaze, as we behold our God nailed to a tree. We cannot turn away, as we witness the One most intimately a part of us and all Creation slain by all that hungers for power over our lives and the life of the greater world. We yet dare to hope for a purpose, in that which seems senseless.

The cross has forever been – in the Christian life, at least – a point of terrible intersection. It's the juxtaposition of all that is human, broken, and fragile – and that which is divine, perfect – and stronger than the fabric of space and time itself. It's a point of intersection between the awful powers of domination and the freedom of God's promises. It's the point where our deepest hatreds and fears are met by the gaze of One who forgives even in the hour of deepest suffering. It's the place where all our hopes and

dreams are shattered by rough splinters and hideous nails. It's the "cross-road" where the deepest pains of our lives, both individual and shared, intersect with a love that reaches beyond time.

We are **almost** a Palm and Passion Sunday people in the end. I say almost, because – of course – neither this day – nor Good Friday – marks the **end** of our story. Instead, they mark the end of a **particular** chapter – the one of utter darkness. The chapter where all that's evil – all that clutches meanly at us – all that's spiteful, petty, and without compassion have their way. They mark the end of that part of the story where we're broken with God in Christ by all that is hideous and inhuman.

All those dark places in our own hearts mesmerize us for a moment, just as they did the crowds in Jerusalem and the leaders, too...from Pilate's complacent arrogance to religious authorities clinging desperately to power and domination.

Today we will hand out palm Branches so that we might celebrate.

You will be given a token memory of the cheering crowd on that first Palm Sunday. A memory of the day when they lovingly spread palms and cloaks and branches into the roadway ahead of our Savior. Consider them for a moment. These are the palms of 'hosanna!' The palms of this "day of acceptance" of our Lord. And yet, in front of us looms a reminder of how the week would end – very differently than how it began. When the shouts of "hosanna" would become shouts of "crucify him!" What looms before us is the cross – heavy, real – too large to ignore. Once a symbol of torture and death – forever a symbol of forgiveness.

The cross of Jesus Christ.

Your cross, my cross, and our shared cross – come to Golgotha with Jesus' cross. And as we say in our baptism, we participate in Jesus' death – we're somehow hoisted with him, too, left out to hang in cold and callous ways by evil. My failings, my brokenness – just like yours and all that we share together – finds its place in the crowds demanding the blood of the innocent.

It's in those thirsty for a spectacle that might provide some relief from that gnawing sense that something is wrong – or – heaven forbid – that **we** might be wrong. My coldness, your coldness – and ours together – is Pilate washing his hands of the matter – coldly and callously handing over an innocent to be brutally murdered in the name of order, our peace of mind, and our sense of control. And I weep, and you weep – as did Mary and all Jesus' beloved who remained to the end – hearts broken by a God who seems to fail in the **worst** possible way. Broken by a God who suddenly appears no longer omnipotent, but frail – perhaps even fickle – while the powers of darkness rage, the sun is covered, the earth shakes, and death visits. And – like the centurion – we're in awe, witnessing a story marked by tragedy and faith, terror and majesty, grief and compassion.

Today, we are people of both Palm and Passion Sunday. And it's with this great collision – at this great “cross-roads” – that we begin Holy Week. We're meant to be broken open – torn open – by this day. We're meant to gaze into the darkest places of our being and open the doors of our lives, so all that is broken and twisted is met. We're meant – like Jesus – to throw ourselves entirely into the hands of a God who seems strangely absent and almost negligent – One who seems to have forsaken us. Let's stay there for as long as we can. Let's allow this week re-make us. Let it remind us of all that we've suffered, all that we're afraid of – of all that we've borne with tears; in this fleeting thing we call life. Let's be naked – in a spiritual sense – as Jesus was before the world and before God as He hung on the cross.

There will be no conquering our **fears**, until we know them as intimately as we know our **hopes**. There will be no conquering evil, until we understand its cold, cruel, and calculating madness. There will be no overcoming hatred, until we've seen its power in our lives and communities with open eyes and broken hearts. And there will be no end to death, until at last we've followed Jesus into it, with our own cross and all that struggles within us. Until at last we're able to let go of every last shred of ego and find rest in the void between that Friday afternoon and Sunday morning to come.

Until we let go completely of ourselves completely and find – at last – that all that’s left, is God. And what comes next is God’s, and God’s alone.

God’s new day. God’s Easter.

Thanks be to God. Amen.