

From Triumph to Scorn

Mark 15:6-20

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Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked.

Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection.

So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom.

Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over.

But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead.

Pilate spoke to them again, 'Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?' They shouted back, 'Crucify him!' Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!' So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him.

And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

If I had it my way I would spend this morning preaching to you about the parade.¹ As the top of your bulletin will tell you, today is Palm Sunday. That's why the choirs and the children processed down the aisle and laid their palms on the communion table as we started worship. It's why we sang "All Glory Laud and Honor." We had our own little version of a parade. But today is also Passion Sunday. Passion meaning "to suffer." That's the church word we use to describe the last week of Jesus' life – we call it Jesus' passion. Today is really the hinge on which the whole story of the gospel pivots towards a climatic finish.

All of that may be true, but what I want to do is preach to you about that parade we just heard Mark describe.

I want to stay in that moment – just stay there – that moment when the disciples and the crowds support Jesus and stand with him and for him. Where branches wave and cloaks are spread and 'Hosannas' ring.

I want to linger on the amazing things that Jesus did in his short ministry; those things the crowds had heard about that had them whipped up into a frenzy as Jesus rode into Jerusalem.

In my imagination, some the people that gathered that day along the side of the road included the very folks whose lives were changed by Jesus just a short time before. Can you see it? Those who used to be lame, dancing in the dusty street. Former-lepers standing along the road clutching palm branches, no longer shunned by the crowds. Bartimaeus – that man who used to be blind – making eye contact with Jesus as he rode by. The little girl who Jesus raised from the dead, standing there beside her parents cheering the Prince of Peace as he he passed through the city gates.

I want to believe that the reason people were gathered to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem was because they really got it.

¹ I am deeply indebted to the Rev. Dr. Laura Mendenhall and her sermon, "The Vulnerability of Love" which gave me this jumping off point for the sermon that follows.

I want to believe they understood that the kind of power that Jesus represented was strength demonstrated through weakness. That they caught on to the irony and the critique of a “king” processing into the capital on a donkey instead of a horse.

I want the story to read differently than the way I know the gospel writers will tell it. Every time we get this this point in the gospel, I hope against hope that something will change – I hope the people with the power to make decisions will finally see the different reality that Jesus is offering: justice and mercy instead of acquisition and control, inclusivity instead of rules designed to preserve the status quo and protect those with power, radical forgiveness and grace instead of forced piety and soulless religion – every time I read this part of the gospel story, I hope against hope that the people who make decisions will understand what Jesus was trying to do and get on board.

But, of course, they don't.
They are threatened by Jesus' message.
They are afraid of change.
They are offended that people would worship this carpenter's son.

And so our story takes a deadly turn.

What I want to do is stay focused on that parade...
So I can spare you the pain of Judas' betrayal
Spare you the disappointment of Peter's denial
Spare you the devastation of Jesus being completely abandoned
Spare you the humiliation of Jesus being tortured
Spare you the grief of hearing the same crowd that was gathered
along the side of the road call for his crucifixion
Spare you the anguish of pierced hands and feet.

I want to stay focused on the parade. Or at least skip ahead to next Sunday when most of us will gather again in this sanctuary. When the focus will be on new life and resurrection and hope and mystery and God's amazing power.

That's what I want to do - but the truth is those palm branches might not have even been cleared from the roadway before the time that Jesus walked that path again on his way to the cross.

And try as I might to protect you from the horror of this story, we cannot avoid the reality of suffering. And as much as I want to spare you from that suffering, who I really want to protect is Jesus.

If I were there in that Palm Sunday crowd – and if I knew what I now know – I would step out in front of that parade before Jesus made it into town and I would wave my hands...not my branches.

I would beg for Jesus to just turn around.

To go back to Capernaum or Nazareth – and away from Pontus Pilate and the chief priests.

I would plead for Jesus to not make a scene – so he might avoid drawing the attention of the people who were threatened by his message.

I would argue that if Jesus would just turn around he could do a lot more good – with more miracles, and more teaching.

I mean three years is not a lot of time to learn from the Word made flesh. That's how long Jesus spent in his ministry before that parade on Palm Sunday. Three short years. If Jesus would have just avoided Jerusalem, think of what else we might have learned! Think of how many more signs and wonders people might have seen!

Of course, my instinct to protect Jesus and us from suffering exposes my lack of understanding about the depth of God's love. Because that suffering is an important part of the story. It is not the point of the story – but it is an important part of the story.

Jesus chose to be vulnerable for our sake. He rode into Jerusalem – unarmed and unadorned. He confronted the people who were threatened by his message. He resisted the instinct to protect himself. He endured the shame of a trial and the cross. He did all of that because perfect love requires this kind of vulnerability. Perfect love requires a willingness to put one's self at risk for the sake of another.

There are some things you can teach. There are other things you have to do. When Jesus chose to ride into Jerusalem he knew the cost – but his love for God’s people, his commitment to God’s vision, and his obedience to God’s will allowed him to stay the course. The journey from the parade to the cross shows us that there is no pain greater than what God’s love can bear. And God did not regret the price.

The problem with jumping straight from Palm Sunday to Easter –
Or with glossing over the hard-to-hear account of Jesus’ last week,
Or with avoiding our own suffering,
Or with avoiding the suffering of the world around us,
Is that if we are only willing to face the parts of our faith, or our lives, or our world that are happy – then we might miss the ways that God brings life out of death. We might miss the significance of God’s love that enters into the messy, painful parts of our existence to remind us that we are not alone.

This week I read an editorial by David Brooks that spoke to the significance and the purpose of suffering. On it’s own, Brooks said, there is nothing noble about suffering. But one of the things suffering helps us to see is that life is more significant than simply a pursuit of happiness. Suffering puts us in touch with holiness – because when we suffer we understand that there is much we do not understand. Oftentimes, Brooks says, when we suffer we don’t come out of the experience healed, we come out different. In that way, suffering can be a “fearful gift.”²

CS Lewis once said, "To love is to become vulnerable, to risk suffering. If you want to make sure your heart is not broken, you must give your heart to no one, to nothing. Then, it will not be broken. Indeed it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable."³

We who follow Jesus have been given a fearful gift in Christ’s suffering. In it, we see the lengths to which God will go for your sake and for mine.

² Brooks, David (*New York Times* Editorial, April 8, 2014).

³ Lewis, CS, *The Four Loves*.

And yet we are not simply called to stand on the side of the road and cheer at this good news. As God's people – holy and beloved – we are also given a responsibility. A responsibility that the apostle Paul reminds us of in his letter to the church:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being born in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

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Let us pray: Holy and gracious God – as we turn now to face this holiest of weeks – where we witness the road you walked and the suffering you endured – where we wait in holy expectation for you to...once again...bring life out of death – we pray that you would give us the courage to enter into those parts of your life and of our own that are fraught with pain. And then, we pray, redeem them. In Jesus' name – Amen.