

PALM SUNDAY / PASSION SUNDAY

A Plot Twist

Luke 19:29-40, Matthew 16:21-23

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

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We started our service today with a beautiful piece of music, "Ain't Got Time to Die". We saw members of the choir lip syncing along. We saw people waving palm branches and flowers and streamers and leaping into the air. That song ends with the words, "If I don't praise him the stones are going to cry out." These words come from the Luke scripture that Sharon read today. Jesus says to the religious leaders who feel the need to keep order, "If you silence these people, the stones themselves will do the shouting." Beautiful! Feisty! I love Palm Sunday. Where do we find Jesus today?

Jesus, who has set his face towards Jerusalem all those weeks ago, is finally closing in on the holy city. He and his band of followers arrive on the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem is visible. Jesus sends two of them ahead of the group to collect a donkey. He is going to ride a donkey into Jerusalem. It seems like an odd choice, but Jesus is engaging in theater. He is enacting political poetry from the Book of Zechariah.

The Book of Zechariah was written after Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon, some 500 or more years before Jesus. Cyrus issued an edict that permitted those Jews who had been subjugated in the Babylonian captivity to return to Jerusalem if they wanted. Not all of them did. Their holy city had been ransacked. It was in shambles. The prophet Zechariah's poetry speaks of better future for those who chose to return to their war-torn home of Jerusalem.

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war-horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.*

By riding into Jerusalem on a donkey that day Jesus was declaring himself this long-awaited king.

Triumphant and victorious is he,

Humble and riding on a donkey

Lest you think *humble and riding on a donkey* describes a meek and mild Jesus, the Hebrew word “ani” translated humble here means an impoverished, socially vulnerable person. Jesus is declaring himself the poor and oppressed messianic king.

Jesus’ followers shout, they take off their cloaks and spread them on the ground before Jesus and the donkey. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord”, they declare. Interestingly enough, there are no palms in the story according to Luke, or Mark, or Matthew...only cloaks spread on the ground. John mentions palms and cloaks. I’m not sure why we don’t call this Cloak Sunday.

The Pharisees want Jesus to stop this political theater. They need Jesus to keep his message “safe”. Think white liberals who told Martin Luther King, Jr. to be patient. They know that Jesus’ radical declaration will anger the powerful. But Jesus denies their request. He has set his face towards Jerusalem. “If you stop these people, the stones themselves will cry out.”

The disciples love this bit of guerilla theater. They have been waiting for this moment. They have followed Jesus all over the Galilean countryside; seen him do miraculous things; witnessed multitudes of the oppressed gathering to hear him. Now they are in Jerusalem, the Holy City, in time for Passover. The place is packed. They can’t wait to see how Jesus is going to rise up his followers and take the city from Rome.

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann calls Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem “the moment of dramatic confrontation.” It is an inaugural event for a week in which Jesus will take on the powers that be - religiously and politically. The first thing Jesus does when he gets to Jerusalem is to go up to the temple and start driving out those who are using it as a place to make money. Then he denounces the Scribes, foretells the destruction of the temple and the destruction of Jerusalem. The disciples are still excited. They have been waiting for Jesus to get his Zealot on. Judas even tries to force Jesus’ hand. They expected this all to end so differently. They didn’t know what it meant when Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem. They didn’t know the plot twist that would lead from Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on a donkey to crucifixion with a sign above his head mockingly declaring him the King of the Jews.

We call this day Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. This week begins with Hosannas and a plot twist will find Jesus whipped and nailed to a cross just a few days later. The stark difference between his entry and his death gives me whiplash. I don’t know how to process it all. Author Anne Lamott writes:

I don’t have the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion. I’d like to skip ahead to the resurrection. In fact, I’d like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday School, who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside the tomb; everlasting life and a basketful of chocolates.

I understand Lamott's dilemma. Much of Christendom will move from palm branches to Easter eggs. Actually, many will just jump in for the Easter eggs and then we will see them again on Christmas Eve.

In the grand story of God, the plot twist of this week is so painful, so gruesome that for centuries Christians have been trying to silence it, sanitize it, skip it or make it more palatable. But if we take this week and reduce it down to palm fronds, hallelujahs, chocolate and he is risen without standing at the foot of the cross we will miss the whole crux of the Gospel.

I am as anxious to get to Easter as anyone. We have been living in a painful plot twist kind of year. It has been a Holy Week year. Think what you were doing....what you were looking forward to a year ago January. We were planning trips, greeting each other with hugs, ignoring racial injustice, taking our jobs for granted, watching politics play out and shaking our heads. We thought we knew how things would basically go in our futures. And then the plot twisted, and we have had more of our share of brokenness, isolation, grief and disappointment.

It is a time like this when the cross becomes even more important. I know that sounds counterintuitive. Let me explain what I mean. We have been looking at the grand story of God. In the Jesus part of this sacred saga, God makes the journey to us. The word becomes flesh in order to fully comprehend the human experience in all its pain and glory -- with its grief, joy broken relationships, connection, illness, injustice, love, oppression, meaning, marginalization, financial hardships...in the flesh....with the potential to be misunderstood and ridiculed...even feeling abandoned and isolated to the point in which Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

When we go from Alleluia to Hallelujah without the cross we miss the God who knows our pain, our suffering, our frustration, our isolation, the injustice of our time. We miss the God who knows what it feels like to walk through times of pandemic; grief over lost loved ones; chokeholds; vast economic inequality; angry mobs, mass shootings.

Friends, we must not skip over the plot twist of this week or we will never fully know the fullness of the good news of the Gospel. We will miss the cornerstone that holds the whole thing together. God in the flesh feels our pain; walks our path; loves us with deep understanding of our suffering.

The fact of the matter is that while I called this sermon about Holy Week a plot twist, it isn't really. If we had been paying attention, we would have known what was going to happen. It wasn't a secret. Jesus kept telling anyone who was listening what was going to happen to him in Jerusalem. In the scripture that Neil read to us, Jesus told his disciples that he would suffer in Jerusalem, be killed and then resurrect three days later. Peter told him to stop talking like that. It appears that both Peter and

Anne Lamott...and most of us for that matter....don't have the right personality for Good Friday. The reason it feels like a plot twist is because we don't want to hear it. We don't want the incarnation to suffer. We don't want to look at the blood, see the whip marks, stand at the foot of the cross.

But if we don't, we will miss the depths of God's love for us. We will forfeit seeing where God's great sacrificial love embraces our deep sorrow. If we don't stand at the foot of the cross, we will not fully comprehend just how present God has been with us through this hellish Holy Week, plot twist of a year. It would be crying shame not to let that truth settle into our very bones.

Love so amazing, so divine
Love so touchable, so present
Amen.