

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Passion/Palm Sunday, April 1, 2012
Lessons: Isaiah 50:4-10 and Mark 11:1-11

PALM SUNDAY AND I

I have always had mixed feelings about Palm Sunday. It has seemed to me a day of ironies and contradictions. Most apparent is the drastic and deadly turnaround in the attitude of the crowd toward Jesus. Jerusalem is jammed with pilgrims for Passover, and so we might well imagine that tensions are high. Passover celebrates the people's ancient deliverance from slavery by the God who adopted Israel and sent Moses to lead them out of their bondage into freedom. But now the Jews see Roman soldiers in the streets of their holy city, and how could they not feel the sting of the contradiction between Passover and their current subjugation? God rescued them from the Egyptians long ago, why not from the Romans now? God sent Moses to challenge the great power of Egypt's pharaoh, why not a new Moses to challenge the power of Rome and its emperor? Why not the Messiah? I doubt that Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Jerusalem, rested easy as pilgrims crowded into the city for the Jewish celebration of deliverance and freedom which lasts, not one day, but seven or eight, providing plenty of time for trouble. As our gospels tell the story, on the Sunday of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem the crowds cheer him, hailing him as the son of David, their great king of old, but by Friday the crowds are calling for his execution. The change might seem unbelievable if we did not know from experience how easy it is to stir up angry crowds in times of fear and shame, and we are living in a time of crowd rage.

The bulletin insert this morning includes an article about One Great Hour of Sharing in which I relate the brief story of an experiment conducted with African children. I will share it aloud now because it is very brief and quite startling to our competitive view of life and the way we as a society teach our children to compete with each other, but also because of some of the reactions it drew when posted on Facebook by its author. She writes:

Today I read a story about an anthropologist who proposed a game to the kids in an African tribe. He put a basket full of fruit near a tree and told the kids that whoever got there first won the sweet fruits. When he told them to run they all took each other's hands and ran together, then sat together enjoying their treats. When he asked them why they had run like that as one could have had all the fruits for himself they said: UBUNTU, how can one of us be happy if all the other ones are sad?

Many on Facebook replied appreciatively to the story – some with an “if only” wistfulness about this alternative to our way of life – but others posted their rage and hatred, some unable to restrain themselves from racist slurs. People who live in fear and shame are easily incited to fury, and the triggers to their anger do not even have to make sense.

Palm Sunday, however, presents a deeper irony than the fickleness of the crowd, a contradiction that comes from Jesus himself. Why does he do it? Why in the world does he wave such a red flag in the face of the bull? Deliberately he fulfills Zechariah’s prophecy of the coming of the Messiah in triumph.

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.

Quite clearly, Jesus declares himself to be the one sent by God, but the prophecy is Messianic, meaning it implies the coming of a king, a ruler above all other rulers. Most of the Messianic hopes among the people were belligerent, as many Messianic hopes are to this day. They look for warfare and victory, the defeat and humiliation of the enemies of the proud people of God. Our world is torn by such hopes from more than one religion, and people who consider themselves the faithful are driven to acts of brutality, murder, and terrorism by just such religious passions. Yet, Jesus presents himself to Jerusalem as the Messiah, and so we call him to this day, for the title Christ means Messiah, the Anointed One of God.

And yet, Jesus declares he has come, not to be served, but to serve and to give his life to redeem many people. Time and again, he rejects the way of power and prestige. He will not use force in the name of God. “If your enemy strikes you on the cheek,” he teaches, “turn the other cheek to him as well,” and if a hated Roman soldier forces you to carry his pack for a mile, volunteer to carry it a second mile for him. “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” or use you spitefully, seeking to humiliate you.

For all our calling him a king, Jesus never wanted to be one. He is not the least bit royal in his attitudes toward people; rather, he identifies with the least respected, the most common of commoners. His teachings and actions both are as un-regal as they could possibly be. He came to be a servant, and he tells any who would follow him that they must be servants, also. “Always speak,” he teaches us, “as though you were the youngest present.” Do not call other people fools or put them down because you differ with them.

Of course, it was in the political interests of European Christendom to downplay Jesus the servant and present him as loudly and as often as possible to the people and to the world as Jesus the king. That's a falsification of Jesus that has misled Christians and the enemies of Christendom alike about the true nature of Jesus. Belligerent Christianity is a contradiction in terms. Jesus sends us into the world to serve, not to rule or dominate. He tells us "be wise as serpents but harmless as doves."

So then, what is his so-called "triumphal entry" – a term the Bible does not use? What is he doing riding that donkey into the city?

More than a few Christians have suggested he is deliberately bringing down upon himself the wrath of the Romans and the Jewish leaders so that they will conspire against him and put him to death. But that suggestion comes from a view that sees Jesus' crucifixion as something staged by God, scripted to achieve our salvation – as though the people involved made no true choices of their own but were merely God's puppets. It has led to a kind of thinking within Christianity that seems to regard Jesus' suffering, humiliation, and execution as one grand passion play in which the primary actor is not really hurt, shamed, or killed because it's all a divine drama. No, it was not a drama. The sufferings of Jesus we remember in this coming week were very real and terrible, and they are shared with countless people who to this day continue to be beaten down, tormented, broken, humiliated, and killed.

Here is how I have been able to resolve in my mind the ironies and contradictions of Palm Sunday. God is faithful. God kept the promise to send our deliverer, even if we misconstrued the form in which he would come to us; for he came, not to judge and punish, but to give himself to restore us to God and to each other so we could ourselves become the kind of people God created us to be. There is a Messiah, an Anointed One of God, but he is not a warrior king. He is the servant who embodies God's love for us and for all people. He is the one sent to change the course of human life and history by giving himself even for those who hate him.

I am thankful today for having the pleasure of receiving new members on a Palm Sunday. The ironies and contradictions of this day are the ironies and contradictions of our life as followers of Jesus in our own time. The church exists to serve, not to rule. We are to bring people together, not push them apart. We are to join hands and run happily together so we can share the fruit of God's grace, the slowest and the quickest of us alike. We are to strengthen each other so we can serve together in a world structured to reward the takers. Sandy, Nancy, and Bruce, welcome officially now into our community of faith in Jesus, the ironic Messiah who came to give himself – the Messiah whose irony is the redemptive truth of God's love. Amen.