

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Passion/Palm Sunday, April 5, 2009
Lessons: Isaiah 50:4-10 and Mark 11:1-11

TO WHAT END?

I have always found Palm Sunday troubling. In our churches, we celebrate Jesus' entry into Jerusalem much as the gospels tell us the crowd in the city for Passover celebrated it the day it happened, with palm branches and cries (or at least songs) of "hosanna." Yet, even that word itself seems ironic. We use "hosanna" as a cry of praise, as people apparently used it back then, and many today think it means, "Praise the Lord," but, no, that's "hallelujah." Hosanna means, "Save!" with the "na" at the end serving as an exclamation point: *Save! Save us!* The shout acknowledges the Savior who has come at last, turning a plea for deliverance into a cry of joyous hope at the arrival of the Deliverer.

Irony, double irony, seems the nature of Palm Sunday. Looking back from our vantage point, we know what is coming later that week. The joyous cries of "Hosanna" will turn to shouts of "Crucify him!" as the Sunday welcome deteriorates into vehement rejection. The double irony is that the cries of "Hosanna" and of "Crucify him!" are bound together because it is in giving himself to humiliation, excruciating torture, and death that Jesus answers hosanna's cry and becomes the Savior. He will ascend, not a throne, but a cross.

But let's back up to the way Jesus chooses to enter Jerusalem, and he does make the choice. There is no necessity in biblical prophesy. In Greek tragedies, an oracle foretells what *must* come to pass, because the foretelling merely reveals what has already been determined by *necessity*. Hebrew prophesy does not foretell what cannot be changed. The whole purpose of biblical prophesy is to change the people's responses to God's love and each other's humanity. "Repent" – *turn around, turn back, change your minds, open your hearts, and live differently, with faithful motives and trust in the your God*. Jesus chooses to fulfill the prophesy of Zechariah and so announce himself as the promised Messiah.

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 . . .

Why? Why does Jesus make such a dangerous, even self-defeating choice? And when I ask, “Why?” I’m not asking about his psychological motivation so much as his purpose. *To what end* does he ride that donkey into Jerusalem? I think the final hymn we will sing in this service gets it both right and wrong.

Ride on! Ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die.

I would not say Jesus went to Jerusalem to die, even knowing that would be the outcome. It was not death he sought for himself, but us and a whole created world he sought for God. He did what he had to do to be faithful to God who loved this world too much to give up on it and let it go. In our present “outcome-based” thinking, we misread the very nature of being human in this world. We don’t get to determine outcomes, as Jesus tries to tell us. Life in the biblical view is relational, which means it matters more how we respond to God’s love and mercy and how we treat each other than what results we determine to achieve, then try to measure and compare.

This outcome-based thinking leads easily to the tremendous lie which says, “The end justifies the means.” No, not ever! Jesus rejects that lie every time it tempts him, but we are very slow to recognize the nature of his choices because they contradict our desire to take control and determine our own outcomes. That is the temptation of the creature made to be freely responsive to God and neighbor: “You shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” The snake in the Garden is the mythical voice of our temptation to seize control of our own outcomes with the great lie that the end justifies the means. That lie pretends to justify treachery, murder, and even torture. The word the Romans took for their most gruesome form of execution – *crucio, cruciare* – means to torture, to afflict with agony and grief. Crucifixion hangs people in prolonged stress positions enhanced by the weight of their own bodies writhing on the nails. If this description sounds familiar, I mean it to be. The Gospel of John tells us that in a callous display of outcome-based thinking, the high priest says of Jesus that “it is expedient that one man should die for the people.” Better to murder one through treachery than risk having the covenant people destroyed. Where is faith in that view? Where is hope? Where, indeed, is love?

Please do not misunderstand what I am saying. We need to consider goals and predictable outcomes. At the simplest level, without such prediction we would have no science or technology, no planning in any of our undertakings, and no goals at all except to live and to love, but without much further definition. When someone is acting irrationally out of strong emotion, the person needs to hear and consider the question, “What are you trying to accomplish?” *You just yelled at your boss in front of your coworkers. What do you hope to achieve? What outcome do you expect?* But when outcome-based thinking makes

the goal, some so-called “greater good,” all-important, then people get sacrificed to that goal. We hear people say offhandedly, “You have to break some eggs to make an omelet.” This is the callous “oh well” with which human suffering is dismissed statistically. After all, Jesus of Nazareth was just one person. *So he didn’t deserve what he got. Oh well.*

Jesus fulfills the prophesy because *he is the one* sent by God to become the Savior, and the truth needs telling. He is the Messiah, though not in the way expected or desired, and that is where, I think, the hymn goes furthest wrong because the church has gone that way.

Bow Thy meek head to mortal pain,
Then take, O God, Thy power, and reign.

Jesus did not come to reign as God’s own Caesar of all Caesars. That role he rejects utterly; he will have none of it. But when the Roman emperors Constantine and Theodosius refitted Christianity from a slave’s faith to the imperial religion, Jesus was falsely transformed from the suffering, self-giving Servant of God and of humanity into divine royalty, as befits the patron deity of empire. So his crucifixion was distorted into a brief attempt by his enemies to defeat him – an attempt he used to turn the tables on them and emerge victorious. No, that’s wrong. Following Jesus was meant to be a counter movement in this world: a movement of love against power, of faith against the drive for success by whatever means, and of hope against the despair in which most of the world’s people are forced to live. His is the humble way of self-giving love, never the way of power and majesty.

To what end do we believe in him, put our trust in him and his way of life, and thereby forego other ways of life? That is the question I want to keep asking myself during this Holy Week. *To what end?* Do I wish only to add the assurance of heaven to the good life on earth, however I choose to define “good life”? Or will I really turn from my way and follow this Jesus, his way? What is this way of faith that does not use people for any outcome-based good, personal or something bigger – the small, selfish good of “me and mine” or some greater good of extended influence? What is required of a commitment to God’s redemptive love for this world’s people? To what end has God given me life on this earth?

The question to be shared is, *To what end has Jesus called us to be a congregation of his church?* Why has he brought us together? What does it mean for us as a church to turn from our way and follow him in his way? I think that what it means needs to be defined by his love for the people out there rather than by our comfort in here.

Palm Sunday is a disturbing day, filled with ironies and questions. May the ironies of self-giving love and the questions such love raises disturb us into life. Amen.