

On Palms and The Passion
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Date: March 24, 2013

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One Palm Sunday a little boy was sick and couldn't go to church. His mom stayed home to take care of him, but his dad didn't want to miss the service so attended on his own. When the dad got home, he showed his son a palm branch and the little boy asked what it was all about. His dad was thrilled that he could answer his son's faith question and that he actually knew the answer without having to make anything up. The father patiently explained that Palm Sunday is the day when Jesus comes into town riding on a donkey, and everyone waves their palm branches to greet him. And this is why we get palm branches at church on Palm Sunday. The son all of a sudden got very upset, and said, "Are you serious, the one Sunday I miss is the day that Jesus showed up at church?"

Now as simple as Palm Sunday may seem—Jesus riding into town on a donkey, palm branches waving to greet him, shouts of Hosanna from the crowd, believe it or not, today is a tricky Sunday. In truth, many ministers agonize over worship choices to make today. I'm a member of the 20/30 UCC Clergy Group on Facebook—a very exclusive group for UCC ministers in our 20s and 30s and we talk about how our ministries are going, ask questions, solicit advice, occasionally complain, and support each other. One of the conversations this week was all about what folks are doing in worship this Sunday, and the responses ranged from dramatic readings of the Passion to a local band performing with scripture in between their songs.

In a nutshell, the choice is between a traditional Palm Sunday service with all the fun and light-heartedness we feel marching around the sanctuary waving our palms versus opting for Passion Sunday where the Passion of Jesus Christ is read aloud or somehow performed in its entirety from one of the Gospels. And we sit here wrestling with Jesus' betrayal, trial, and death before we even get to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday later in this Holy Week. Many ministers opt to try to do both somehow, to celebrate Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem while acknowledging that this same crowd will turn against him, that their shouts of "Hosanna" will turn into shouts of "Crucify him" in a few days.

At my former church, the senior minister, who called the shots when it came to worship, decided to take a stand for Passion Sunday one year. He said that he was sick and tired of empty pews on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, that he wanted the whole congregation to hear the Passion of Jesus Christ on Palm Sunday. That he didn't think it was right to go from happiness on Palm Sunday to complete and utter joy on Easter without acknowledging all the sadness in between. After all, Jesus can't be resurrected if he doesn't die first, right?

On Palm Sunday, he decided to not preach at all. From the pulpit he read the Passion account from the Gospel of Luke. He let the narrative speak for itself and didn't try to analyze it or explain what certain elements of the scripture mean. He just read the Gospel and let the powerful words of scripture do the talking. After he was done, the whole congregation sang "Were You There?" one of the saddest and most poignant Holy Week hymns we have in the Christian tradition.

But he took a stand, that year he made this Palm and Passion Sunday. He read the Passion of Jesus Christ to the gathered community instead of preaching, and he was feeling great about his decision. At the end of the service, this little elderly woman came up to him in the receiving line, obviously having no clue about the difficult decision he made to change this worship service and apparently not fully understanding the service itself. She sweetly shook his hand

and said, "That was the best sermon you've ever preached! You just have such a way with words, what beautiful, poetic language you spoke!"

Needless to say when he told the rest of the ministers what happened, we just about fell on the floor laughing. After that, whenever he would read scripture, someone on staff would inevitably tell him that it was the best sermon ever. Here he was on that Palm and Passion Sunday in this self-righteous way, and I think even he would describe it as a bit self-righteous, taking a stand, showing the congregation that they can't avoid the difficult aspects of our faith. And it's true, but all of this was completely lost on this sweet woman. It was one of those moments where we all need to remember—don't take yourself so seriously, no one else does. That certainly applies to preachers in our pulpits, but I think we'd all do well to remember to put things into perspective sometimes.

Now this is all a roundabout way of saying that it's valid and understandable that Christian clergy stress out over worship choices on this day, and I want you to understand this too. The point my former colleague was trying to make and the stand he took is legitimate. This is Holy Week; it's a week full of mixed emotions and all sorts of beautiful and troubling moments. We have to acknowledge the pain and the sadness if we truly want the joy and new life of Easter to sink into our hearts. Life is full of highs and lows, mountains and valleys. And if we never find ourselves wandering, sad, lonely, scared, angry, feeling all sorts of heavy emotions in the valley, I'm not convinced that we can fully appreciate when we feel triumphant on top of the mountain, full of confidence, love, and gratitude for it all.

Holy Week and the great swing of emotions we feel when we fully observe it and let it affect us brings this home to us as people of faith. I hope you can observe Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and I know that your Easter will be more meaningful if you do. After all, Benedictine nun and worship scholar Joan Chittister describes Holy Week like this, "Deep down inside of us, we already know what the life of Jesus and these first days of Holy Week confirm: there are some things worth living for, even if we find ourselves having to die for them as well. We suffer things we would rather not undergo because we realize that if we fail to endure them, we can never achieve what we want most in life. . . Firefighters brave death to save their cities. For the sake of the new life to which they are giving birth, women endure long, hard labor pains . . . knowing why we choose to suffer is what makes suffering bearable." [1]

Holy Week is not just about the past events we commemorate, the events that marked the end of Jesus' life. It's about what's happening in our lives now. When we observe it, all the way from Palm Sunday to Easter, we get to experience a whole range of human emotions. We get to reflect on why we may choose to suffer at times, and what is it in our lives that is worth living for? And we get to do it side by side as people of faith. We're not focusing exclusively on the Passion today, and that especially means that we shouldn't ignore the events of Holy Week.

Really, the way I think of Palm Sunday is on a more interpersonal/relational level. There are times when we ask members of our families, friends, acquaintances, whomever, a simple question like, "What's up? How are you?" And their response is a standard, "Okay" or "Fine" or even "I'm doing well." But when we really take a minute to look at them, really meet their eyes and look at them, we may be able to see that something is going on underneath the surface that's not being said. The standard response is rote and perhaps mechanical, and we may sense that there's something more.

When we first look at Palm Sunday and stay on the surface level, it may seem like over the top frivolity or excessive happiness—waving the palms, shouting, like a big parade to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem. Luke tells us, "As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, 'Blessed is the king who comes in

the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"[2] And yet in the midst of all this joyful praise and loud voices, we see some authority figures in the crowd who basically tell Jesus to keep quiet over there, you're causing a scene, and tell your disciples to stop. Just stop.

Or else what? What happens if they don't stop shouting and praising and marching and trying to live out the Kingdom of God on earth? Then what? When we take a closer look at the situation, when we dig a little deeper, we see that the joyful surface seems to be covering up something rather ominous underneath. Everything seems fine, okay; we're doing well over here. But you sense there's something more to this story, and there's something more to all of our stories too. As Reformed Church Minister Scott Hoezee says, "We need to look deep into those eyes of Jesus on this day. We need to see the sadness just behind the mirth, the deep pity that undergirds the larger celebration. Because in seeing that on the face of Jesus, we find yet another way to identify with our Lord—or perhaps better said, we find another way in which our Lord is able to identify with us." [3]

All of us come to worship Sunday after Sunday with a whole host of things we carry deep inside of us, both good and bad. Practicing our faith together, walking through this Holiest Week of our faith is a chance to bear one another's burdens and witness one another's lives alongside the life of Jesus. Holy Week provides the opportunity to identify with God on a deeper level and allow God to identify with wherever we are at this moment in our lives too, the highs and the lows, the ups and the downs, the mountains and the valleys, the myriad of emotions we bring every time we step through those doors.

I hope to see you later this week. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year: The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life*, 130-131.

[2] Luke 19:37-38.

[3] Scott Hoezee, *Commentary on Luke 19:28-40*, Center for Excellence in Preaching at the Calvin Theological Seminary, <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php>