

Palm/Passion Sunday
March 29, 2025
New Song Church
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Luke 19:28-40
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 31:9-16
Philippians 2:5-11
Luke 22:14 - 23:56

Hosannas Complicated by Crucifixion

It is a hard thing to understand – this day that we call Palm Sunday **and** Passion Sunday -- as though shouts of “Hosanna” and “Crucify” could really be held together in a single hour on a Sunday morning. The moods are so different that we have to use two separate portions of the gospel story at different places in the worship service because they just don’t fit side by side. From the heights of Palm Sunday’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of the service, we are immediately plunged into the depths of Jesus’ betrayal, trial, and his death on the cross. Does anyone remember a day when the only Gospel lesson of the day for Palm Sunday was about the palms and Hosannas? Back then, hosannas were not complicated by crucifixion.

Doesn’t the crucifixion come later this week? Can’t we have a few days to ease into the horror of the cross instead of being broadsided by it while we still hold palm branches in our hands and have shouts of hosannas ringing in our ears?

Well, no, we can’t, and with good reason. We need to know the whole story. Without the passion story paired with the triumphal

entry into Jerusalem today, those who aren't able to be here for services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, where typically the painful parts of our story come to life, would go from waving palms and singing "Hosanna in the Highest" this Sunday, to shouting, "Alleluia, Christ is Risen" next Sunday. But Hosanna and Alleluia are not the whole Gospel story. There is darkness in this story. There is pain in this story. And, truth be told, we would rather cover our eyes and not peek out again until the stone has been rolled away. But the Gospel will not let us. The Gospel asks us to stand before the cross, to look into Jesus' eyes, to see Jesus' suffering for what it is, and to contemplate the awesome power of his death and what that means for us.

That's the hard part – facing the pain. After all, we spend most of our lives trying to avoid pain. And, isn't that a big part of what Jesus' ministry was about? Making people's pain go away?

If we look at the chapters of Luke's Gospel that lead us to today's Palm/Passion stories, we'll find Jesus very busy ridding people's lives of pain and suffering: He fed people when they were hungry and healed those whose lives were tormented with diseases and deformities and demons. He took away their pain of alienation by restoring them to community and to lives of service and meaning.

So where does “Take up your cross and follow me” fit in? It begs the question... Does God want to relieve our suffering and increase our joy or does God want us to enter into pain willingly and walk the way of death? We believe that God wants us to be whole, integrated, healthy people who embrace life. Then what does Jesus mean when he asks us to take up our cross and follow him?

Sometimes you hear people say, "Well that's just her cross to bear," and they are referring to all kinds of suffering...everything from putting up with an overbearing relative to dealing with a debilitating disease.

The assumption is that the cross is a symbol for any kind of suffering and pain. But the cross is not a symbol of generalized suffering. It is a symbol of execution. Surely Jesus isn't asking us volunteer to be executed to prove our love for him. What purpose would that serve?

Could it instead be an invitation to discover that good for which we are willing to suffer or perhaps even to die for ... that good for which we would lay down our life? Could it be that "being obedient to the point of death" is about doing God's will as we discern it...regardless of the costs.

In Philippians, Paul tells us to “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” It is the sort of mind, Paul tells us, that casts ego and self-preservation aside in order to be obedient to God, even to the point of death. For Jesus, the cross was the way of suffering that would lead to new life, and so Jesus approached it willingly. In going to his death, he showed us the depth of his love and gave us life. In his mind – in God’s mind – the sacrifice was worth the cost. Our lives and our salvation were worth the cost.

In Mark’s gospel, when Jesus tells the disciples of his impending suffering, Peter takes him aside and begins to rebuke him. He cannot accept what he is hearing. But Peter’s plea for Jesus not to suffer in that way--to avoid the cross--was like pleading with a woman not to suffer for the birth of her child. The suffering is for the sake of love and for the promise of life.

The point of our lives is neither to avoid pain nor to endure pain for pain’s sake. The point of our lives is to follow Christ ... to do the will of God ... to do the hard thing, if it is the right thing ... to choose love and justice and goodness over the path of least resistance, to choose action over apathy ... and to bear whatever suffering comes in order to bring the Christ-in-us to life in the world.

As we follow Jesus in the Way of the Cross this week, we are invited to come to terms once again with the pain of betrayal, of servanthood, of isolation, of sacrifice. For in that pain, God's promise, God's love is made known.

Amen