

Sermon delivered by Pastor John V. Carlson on April 1, 2012

And Still He Rides On
Yr. B, Passion/Palm Sunday
Phil. 2:5-11

Every time Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday rolls around, I find my emotions split down the middle. At one moment, I can feel myself standing with the crowds along the way that Jesus' little procession is traveling. The Mediterranean sunlight pours down upon us, drenching us in good feelings and high spirits, as sounds from the crowd fill our ears. Imagine yourself listening to the eager entries, "Hosanna! Save us now!" and imagine that maybe, for a moment, some of them understood what we think we understand: that this man who rides into Jerusalem is truly the Son of God, is truly able to save all of us from the burden of sin.

And the next moment, I remember that I am only at the beginning of Holy Week, not the end; I remember that this preliminary celebration is but the prelude to a week in which opposition to Jesus by the Temple leaders intensifies to the point where they concoct a plan to bring Jesus down: to end his ministry, to end his life. No wonder we find our emotions on a roller coaster.

And if that's how we feel, imagine how Jesus must have felt. Luke's version of this story catches the wild ride Jesus' own emotions are on: When the Pharisees warn him to quiet the crowds, he rebukes them defiantly, telling them that "if these are silent, the very stones will cry out." But then, a moment later, as Jesus catches sight of Jerusalem Luke tells us he down in tears, saying, "If you had only understood the things that make for peace, but they are hidden from your eyes."

And still he rides on. Picture him now, as the procession makes its way toward us. He's on this donkey—not because it's the cheapest animal in the rental lot, but because it fulfills an Old Testament prophecy, from Zechariah: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of 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." And O, how unlike the processions of the mighty Romans on their war horses, how unlike the finery of King Herod.

As he draws near us, the palm branches are held high, and when the crowds shout "hosanna," we want to join them. We want to call out to Jesus, "save us, too." For as we hear those words, we know there is so much to be saved from: it is so hard to resist the lure of material things and pleasures in our world; it is so hard to overcome the anxiety about money in a shaky economy where lots of people are out of work. In our diverse society, we know things are not quite right between rich and poor, between black and white, between different views values and different faiths, but we don't really know what to do about it.

We wish too we could be saved from the mean thoughts that come up in us from time to time. We wish we could be saved from the petty grievances and little emotional wounds that seem to cripple us, and damage our relationships. We wish we could be saved from our fear of failure, our half-hearted commitment, the prejudice and anger that interfere with healthy living and spiritual growth.

Even in the church itself, we suffer from doubt and fear: we worry about membership and money and attendance and lack of youth; we fear division and stagnation and loss of purpose. Most of all, we fear the indifference of society toward who we are and what we preach.

So yes, as Jesus rides on, the hosannas are exhilarating, heart-felt, do doubt. We are happy to let ourselves get caught up in them. Though we are proud, though we try our best, down deep we know: we would be glad to be saved from sin, for we know we cannot save ourselves. So, yes: Hosanna! Hosanna!

And we have to believe that Jesus is glad for such a welcome, for this is why he came. And yet, when we catch a glimpse of Jesus' face, we must imagine it tinged with a knowing sadness, and we realize what he understands: that the crowds have not understood at all. Yes we want a Savior, but we want him to save us on our own terms. We want him to save us without our losing control of our own future, without having to give up much in the way of comfort and security. We want to be saved by having our values confirmed and our ideas validated. We want to be saved, but we don't want to have to change.

So yes, we might very well see sadness in the face of Jesus this Palm Sunday; for this is also Passion Sunday, and somehow Jesus knows that the same crowds that welcome him as the One who comes in the name of the Lord will, by the end of the week, be calling for his crucifixion.

And still he rides on. And as he passes by, we may begin to think about the week that lies ahead, that fateful week containing those events that we have come to know so well: First comes that scene in the Temple. We talked about it a couple of weeks ago: tables being turned over, cash boxes emptied and coins running all over the floor, money changers chased out of the Temple by Jesus himself. This is his in-your-face challenge to the status quo, to the powers-that-be, to institutional religion that has turned a house of prayer into a den of thieves.

And though it makes us uncomfortable, we know it is also a challenge to any church today that is more concerned with its own survival than with faithful mission. Do we still want to be saved? Are we ready to join Jesus in seeking a true vision for God's house? And still he rides on.

The week continues with difficult and disturbing confrontations with the Pharisees and scribes: they are trying to entrap him, trick him into saying something that they can have him arrested for. Such conversations are a warning to us to beware of forcing Jesus into our preconceived notions of him. This is also the time in which he predicts to his disciples that the Temple will be destroyed, that many trials and tribulations await his followers in the future, and again we must be cautioned that the church does not exist solely for our consolation, but to preach the gospel, even though it be costly.

And still Jesus rides on, and as the hosannas begin to die down around us, we remember that this week ends with a sad final meal with his disciples, a lonely time of prayer in which he prays for another way. And then, comes abandonment by his friends when he is arrested, a hastily arranged trial on bogus charges, a brutal flogging, and finally, death on one of the cruelest instruments of execution ever sanctioned by human society.

Hosanna. Save us now. And save us he does, but it is not in the way those who greeted him in Jerusalem would have written the script. And it is not the way we would have written the script either. If it were up to us, we'd be glad to have Palm Sunday without Passion Sunday. We'd be glad to have Jesus work a miracle or two, change the hearts of Pilate and Herod and Caiaphas, open the dense minds of the disciples, head off the cries of "Crucify him."

But it is not to be: "the Son of Man must suffer and be killed, and those who want to become my followers must take up their cross daily." "Destroy this Temple, and see it raised up in three days." "As Moses lifted up the serpent, so must the Son of Man be lifted up on the cross." "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth *and dies*," it will bear no fruit. There is no resurrection without crucifixion; there is no salvation apart from the cross.

And so, he rides on. Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday are somehow one and the same. Along with the crowds in Jerusalem, we welcome Jesus with chants of "Hosanna! Save us now!" And we mean it. But by the end of the week, when the crowd is shouting "crucify him," we know we will be there among them.

And still, knowing of the hostility of the establishment, and the fickleness of the crowds, and the instability of the disciples—and of us—Jesus rides on. He rides on, because this is the only way in which he can fulfill his mission, his purpose. Paul, writing to the Philippians, quotes an early Christian hymn which declares that Jesus "emptied himself, taking on human likeness, and in humility "became obedient to the point of death on a cross." In humility and obedience, he shows us what an authentic life lived in relationship with God looks like.

And then Paul says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." What an audacious thing to say! It's almost outrageous: You—me—have the same mind that was in Christ! That's impossible, isn't it?

No. It's not impossible. Because as we watch Jesus ride by on this Palm/Passion Sunday, we know two things: First of all, we know that he will go alone to die, abandoned and betrayed and denied by his friends, and by us.

But we also know that because he does, we have eternally the chance to repent, to empty ourselves of sin and pride, to be baptized into that humility and to begin again in obedience to our Lord. Jesus goes to die alone, but because he does, we are joined to him forever.