

PALM SUNDAY Year B 2009

**Our times are in your hand; in your loving kindness save us.
*AMEN.***

Of all days in the church year, Palm Sunday seems like the one on which a homily is the least needed and least effective. It is silence we each need after hearing the Passion, but Palm Sunday is one of the few Sundays, on which the BCP explicitly requires a homily. Palm Sunday is two occasions and while each is necessary, they don't make sense together, but the Church in its reality knows we can't celebrate the suzerainty of Jesus today, and then celebrate Easter next Sunday, trusting that everyone who goes to church today, Palm Sunday, will indeed hear the Passion read before Easter. The church requires that we don't skip the crucifixion and that we must think and feel Good Friday before we get to Easter.

We celebrate at the beginning of Palm Sunday, by walking around a physical area of the church and its neighborhood, singing Hosannas, and waving palms, signs and symbols of thanksgiving, honor, and joining together as those in Jerusalem, did around Jesus. We follow a cross as our forebears followed Jesus, and we exalt him. Here with water, incense and glad hosannas, we've just walked around our own mission area and its refurbished and renovated kitchen to include those who there are served regularly, and then we've walked through part of our neighborhood and city, and its memorial to victims of homicide. We celebrate the saving action of God's covenant with the most needy, the most abused, and our neighbors.

The covenant God has made over and over is to save God's people, no matter what. The Creator understands that people miss the mark and tries again and again, with Noah and his family, with Moses on several occasions, Jeremiah, and finally with Jesus, God's human living Godself as covenant, at a specific real time and place. Each covenant is essentially the same, God's promises to save people and offers a physical sign of the existing relationship to be visible proof for generations to come.

For us, this parade of palms, singing, and blessing, reaching out to those around us, feels ominous, but it shouldn't. We're supposed to

celebrate, meaning it and feeling it. We're supposed to be excited with and for the Beloved of God, savior of Lazarus, the advocate of the down and out, the challenger of the Roman and Jewish authorities, the friend of Mary and Martha, our hero and leader. But the institutional church knows we'd all as soon skip Good Friday, especially as would Jesus and the Holy One have preferred to find another effective sign of the new covenant that God was making for those with whom God already had a relationship. We know how this parade will end, so we think the happiness and parade foreshadow what is to come, so we never really acknowledge the excitement and cheer of the arrival in Jerusalem. We don't really enjoy the excitement of having Jesus come to us—we already know what it will cost him. We know all the enjoyment of his arrival will be turned to dust, joy into sadness, cheers into jeers, politically challenging to politically trapped, accusing to condemned, living to dying—and we have to make that those transitions in the course of singing and walking around, until we get into the church. Our clothes, the collects, the kind of singing, and the whole tenor of the liturgy must change after our entrance.

Then we hear the reading of the Passion. Every detail is grisly, blunt, and has a seeming interest, even excitement, and almost prurient interest in appalling details. Think of the physical representations of the passion, the near salacious and lurid detail of the torture, the body, the death.

Phyllis Tickle says the question people have asked about the crucifixion is “If God is so smart, all-powerful, and loving, why did God have Jesus die to save people, to make himself the new covenant, in such a painful, ugly, and horrible way?” She says that people of our generation and the next find that such an unacceptable question that people don't trust the whole enterprise of Christianity, of the religion that proclaims God sent his Son to an inevitable, shameful, and horrific death. Tickle says we can only build an emergent church by changing the question to “How far would God go to save us, to ensure our safety, to forgive our sins, to insure God's covenant of salvation and love for all people?” God would go

as far as it took to follow a path of truth, of saving action, of sinlessness.

Think of the images of crucifixes we've looked at all our life, not the other images of Jesus. There is an excitement at his tortured image, the brutality, the pain, and the suffering. It seems to enhance his suffering in a way to thrill us on some awful level.

What do we make of that? Personally I cannot imagine any mother, sister, or daughter portraying a beloved Jesus in that way. Somehow the images were made dramatic to make a terrible visual point of the misery of the death to emphasize the lengths to which God went, that Jesus went. I think people's reaction to the tortured image was to sense that if Jesus would, could, did suffer that much, then our sins aren't as bad as would merit that appalling degree of horror, so we can tuck into his work, his sacrifice, his suffering, and be safe. We didn't do anything so bad that his death that way would be our fault. The mindset of our time, however, would find that figuring somewhere between sick, obsessive, and just wrong. How could a good and loving God allow the torture of Jesus as some kind of acceptable payment for our sins? While Jesus might choose to go the limit for people, we recognize two things about our sins. First they're virtually inevitable, since we're human, and second, awful and disappointing as they are, sins don't merit the torture and the virtual sadism shown on many crucifixes. There is a history of such misery but by sick people and no loving person would let such fiendishness happen. Jesus' self-offering was a gift, and we'll accept the gift, but not the salacious suffering.

That's the problem with the second half of the Palm Sunday. The first part isn't a persuasive celebration and the Passion comes out not like a gift, a self-offering but nearly a kind of exhibitionism which is both grim and is supposed to be our fault. Change the question; change the image of what we see. How far will God go for us? As far as it takes. What would that look like? How far did your mother, your father, your beloved, your child, your friend go for you? What did that look like? What does it look like? Grab you away from an on-coming car, spraining an ankle? Give you the second drumstick, so you never knew he liked dark meat? Repeatedly clean up after you

were sick from eating badly, drinking worse, or living dangerously? Work for years and years to see that you had an education they never had? How would we say compactly all the actions that had been given to each of us for our whole lives to keep us safe one way and another, to protect our souls? How would we represent giving all people forgiveness for all sins, for all time? If you were to describe in a sentence all the actions people have done for you to save you from your own misguided actions, the misguided actions people did against you, and the random harmful actions, which came your way, how would you say that? How would you describe that way to look out for us, to save us, not only for our past and present actions, but also for all the actions, situations, feelings and living to come? Not saving us from being late, overeating, getting angry at injustice, forgetting things we want to remember, but being mean, unkind, unjust, thoughtless, harming ourselves, harming others, and missing the mark for the ways we would want to have lived our whole lives, living rightly, had we managed ourselves perfectly. What image would we now choose?

We believe that somehow when Jesus kept on keeping on, he achieved that. What Jesus did didn't sit well with people because he took on the role of the eternal creator and savior. How did he do that, by keeping on keeping on, so that the forces, which were intent on keeping him from living that directed life without sin, took increasingly bold measures against his work? How have I offended, such that I am involved in his story? He intended to gather up all sins, of all people of all time, and carry them with him to leave them behind, and then to keep on towards living without them with God forever. Were you there when they crucified our Lord? How had he offended? How did we? How will we?

Follow through this whole week, understanding there is no vivid, real way to describe chasing the hounds of hell back into their lairs, taking all sins once for all, by some real process in one human's life? The image of the annunciation blinds us so that the incarnation and birth are clouded by images of shepherds, angels, a star, and other bright images which don't always feel, look, seem to us like the real, factual account — but we love the beauty of the layers of that beginning.

Shredding that shining and beloved beginning into a mystery of unparalleled horror to describe God's eternal victory over all the forces and images of evil, injustice, committed and failed, must challenge what and how we understand people's actions and God's actions and responses. Somehow if we were to envision an ugly *stickie* slapped onto Jesus for every sin, committed and omitted, through all time and by all people, we could never take in the full horror of what that would look like, feel like, as a burden, an albatross, a cross. Follow through the whole week and imagine the work and ways to express it that don't seem physically repellant to you but express the length, breadth, and depth of the burden Jesus took on for us, all of us, for always. Look at him as he goes to achieve the covenant God makes with all people, to save them. Jesus doesn't just lift up a snake on a stick to show people that God provides a way to look up and find saving health, but he takes the role of the one lifted up, the one to whom to look for salvation. Look up to Jesus as he carries our sins, knowing his gift is one beyond our vision and imagining, but it is an eternally saving covenant for all. Hard as the form is to look at in this week, see beyond the form to see the covenant. It is more than Good News; it's the Best News.

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