

Palm Sunday  
March 25, 2018  
The Rev. Denise Trogdon

### **Born Anew in our Graves**

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!

Today we participate in a liturgy of contrasts. Standing at the gates of Jerusalem, our palms wave in celebration, our cloaks are spread for the coming king. We enter into the triumphal procession with shouts of praise, "Hosanna in the highest!" But within the hour our voices turn to angry cries as we retell the story of the passion. "Crucify him!" is our symbolic participation in that dark moment. No matter how many times I've joined in this ritual, that shift is a chilling reminder of our heart's capacity for both light and shadow.

Truth be told, I miss when Palm Sunday was observed on its own, without the passion narrative. The day was filled with hope and anticipation, and the sacred story unfolded throughout the week. Those days before Easter, we were immersed in the walk to the cross, witnesses to the harsh realities of Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial. Deep into Holy Week, our hearts encountered that stunning silence of Good Friday.

But if you wanted to avoid all the unpleasantness, it was as simple as just showing up the following Sunday for Easter. This liturgy that includes both Palm and passion thrusts us into an encounter with Christ's suffering. In sharp contrast to the triumphal entrance, we leave in unsteady silence. On some level our hearts recognize this journey Jesus walks, as our own. We are all too familiar with this pattern that unfolds in the Christian story; life, death, resurrection and hope.

We begin this pilgrimage in the city of Jerusalem. It was a time of preparation for the Passover, the most holy week of the Jewish year. Faithful worshipers gathered to celebrate this great feast, commemorating their deliverance from bondage in Egypt. The air was charged with anticipation. Jesus entered Jerusalem not with military might on a great steed, but rode in on a donkey, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah: "Lo your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey."

Jesus Followers stood by the road waving palms shouting, "Hosanna to the son of David, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Scholars translate "Hosanna" to mean "save us!" The palm branches harkened back to a Jewish hero named Maccabaeus who rode into Jerusalem in victory. Now their bondage was from Roman occupation. Dare they see Jesus as a liberator, the savior for whom they had waited? Dare we see Jesus as our deliverer from bondage and suffering?

An article in the NY times by David Brooks entitled *What Suffering Does*, muses about a culture that seems obsessed with the goal of happiness, yet finds meaning in the hard experiences of life. He writes, "When people are thrust down into these deeper zones, they are forced to confront the fact they can't determine what goes on there. As people endure suffering they find they are not who they believed themselves to be." While some are not healed on the other side of pain, they are undoubtedly changed. When adversity brings us to our knees our hearts are ready to cry out Hosanna save us! Yet, how many of us white knuckle our way back to stability?

In the letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote from the bowels of a prison cell, possibly at the edge of his own grave. This man who knew suffering, urged his followers to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God emptied himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

This poetic reflection on Christ’s humility challenges our conventional understanding of power. It speaks to a new freedom found in dispossession, in emptying one’s self of the things that bind us. It conceives of surrender as a courageous act of faith rather than weakness. The followers of Christ are called to be of the same mind, to empty ourselves in humility. Something new then can be born of what has been laid to rest. Surrender goes against everything our culture teaches us. Choosing to let go of our resistance shifts something deep within. In essence, we die to our need to be in control and a space is created for the new to be born. Surrender is the beginning of redemption. In that sense, our path to transformation mirrors Christ’s walk to the cross.

Theologian Paul Tillich wrote of a witness in the Nuremberg war crime trials who lived for a time in a grave. He hid alongside several others, who had escaped from the gas chamber. In a nearby grave a young woman gave birth to a baby boy. As the child uttered its first cry, the man prayed “Great God hast thou finally sent the Messiah to us? For who else than the Messiah Himself, can be born in a grave?”

Our faith journey places us squarely in the tension between Palm and passion. We live in the relief that Jesus has come for us, and the foreboding that there are crosses to bear before we can find new life. Our hearts are both light and shadow desiring and resisting God’s call to us. While we may want to avoid the horror of the passion, it is in the crucible of the cross that our own transformation occurs. The only way to redemption is to walk the path of most resistance; life, death, resurrection and hope. In the shadow of the cross we cry out, “Hosanna, save us!” Jesus meets us where we are and brings hope for liberation from our own bondage. Only the Messiah can empower us to be born anew in our graves. Amen