

Palm Sunday, Year B

The Gospel according to Mark

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The Passion reading we just heard wasn't something I experienced growing up mostly in the Southern Baptist church. In fact, I didn't experience Holy Week either. Baptists seem to skip all that and go straight to Easter. Oh, they do the Passion story but as a play, sometimes quite graphic, but you sit and watch. A member of the audience completely removed from the action.

So, my first experience with Palm Sunday in the Episcopal Church was a bit of a shock. My first Palm Sunday service started outside as the Oklahoma wind ripped away words and threatened to scatter palm branches to all corners of Stillwater. Then I was handed a palm branch. My response was something along the lines of "um, okaaaay, thank you" as I surreptitiously glanced around trying to figure out what I was supposed to do with it.

For the first time I heard the Passion story read by different members of the congregation. When I heard the voices of Jesus, Peter, and all the others coming from not just in front of me but beside me and behind me as well; I realized that I was placed right in the middle of the Passion story. It was a profound moment as I realized that I was no longer a watcher, but an active participant in the events leading up to and including Jesus' death on the cross.

My first Passion reading, just like today's, came from Mark's Gospel with one difference. When it reached the part where Pilate asks the crowd what he should do with Jesus, the whole congregation was supposed to reply, "Crucify him!" No lead in, no softening of the blow, just the sharp, harsh words, "Crucify him!" I choked. I couldn't say those words. No longer was I separate from the action in a safe comfortable seat; I was an active participant in what was going on. And it hurt. It caused physical pain in my gut and in my heart. It still does. It took me years to get the point where I could man up and say those words, "Crucify him!", because I came to realize that there were times in my life when what I said and what I did shouted those words even if they weren't physically said at all. The Passion story isn't something that only happened some 2000 odd years ago. It happens every day, all around us. We live the Passion story. We and the people we encounter in our daily lives are Pilate and Judas and Peter and the Pharisees and soldiers and the members of the crowd who shout "Crucify him!" when faced with the choice of the world or Christ.

As members of the crowd, how often in our lives have we been faced with the choice offered by Pilate- Barabbas or Jesus? Barabbas is the world and the culture in which we live that tempts us and separates us from God. A Starbucks double espresso tall latte or buying a meal for the homeless man who sits shrunken in the corner because it is warm inside and he hopes he won't be noticed and asked to leave? Watching football games every Sunday or spending time with

your community of faith worshipping God? Ignoring racial slurs and hurtful comments to be part of the “in” crowd or standing up for what is right and risk being an outcast? Building a wall to keep out the stranger or feeding the hungry and welcoming the outsider?

When we follow the siren call of the world rather than the call of Christ to love one another as we are loved, we have nailed Jesus to the cross just as assuredly as the crowd did back then. When faced with the choice of the world or Christ, how often have our words and actions shouted, “Crucify him!”?

Then there is Judas. Judas, who entered Jerusalem on the heels of Jesus, waving and smiling at the crowd as palm branches were laid down along the way. Judas, who was present at all the meetings, who heard all the sermons, fed the hungry, did what Jesus asked him to do, expecting in return that Jesus would make his life better by overthrowing his oppressors. When things didn’t go the way Judas wanted them to go, the way he expected them to go, he lost hope and felt betrayed. In his hurt, his anger, and his pain he turns his back on Jesus. Feeling betrayed, he becomes the betrayer.

We go to church, hear all the sermons. We pray. We give, repent, serve others, do all the things that Jesus asks us to do and yet we still find ourselves in a dead end job. Still find ourselves dumped by our boyfriend or girlfriend or our marriage shattered. Still find ourselves unable to shake the addiction that consumes us. Still find ourselves battered and bruised at the hands of our abusers. Still watch our children go to bed hungry every night because we can’t put food on the table. We came to Jesus looking for a better life, did what He asked and got what in return? For some, we think, we got nothing. Nothing we hoped for, nothing we wanted, nothing we prayed for. We lose hope and feel betrayed. In our hurt, anger and pain we turn our backs on Jesus just like Judas.

And Peter. The rock. Always giving 110%. Dependable. Strong. Jesus’ A- number one man all the way. One of those guys who today would be wearing a “Jesus Freak” t-shirt. Unshakable in his faith and devotion to Jesus. Until his world was turned upside down. All that stuff Jesus talked about that Peter and the other disciples thought were theory, they became reality- Jesus under arrest, on trial, facing death, their own lives at risk for being a follower of Jesus. Fear replaces faith and Peter denies having anything to do with Jesus three times.

It is hard to be a follower of Christ in the world. Following Christ often means going against the norm. It can result in ridicule, separation from family, persecution, and physical violence. The question from a co-worker or peer, “You go to church, right?” can either be a hand extended in peace or a bomb ready to explode. Fear of the response to our answer or our actions can guide us more than our faith, just like Peter.

We are Pilate, forcing others to make the choice for us so that our hands are clean. We are the scribes, elders, and bystanders watching, waiting for and demanding proof of Jesus’ divinity.

We are the women watching from afar, marginalized but still believing in what others tell us isn't possible.

We gather here, in our own upper room. Disciples, called by Christ. On Thursday, we will wash each other's feet just as Jesus washed His disciple's feet and we will live the command to serve one another. We will strip the altar bare, reminding us of the suffering and humiliation that our Lord had to suffer so that we might live. We will stay awake through the night, watching and praying with Christ in the garden during His final hours before His arrest and trial. On Friday, we stand at the foot of the cross, weep at His death, and commemorate His burial. We live the Passion story.

No matter who we are in this story- Judas or Peter or Pilate or one of the many others- we are welcome here, at the table. We gather in the upper room. We come to the table and sit with Jesus. He sees us. He knows us- who we have been and who we are. And still, Jesus, in his love for us says, "Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you."

Amen