

March 24, 2024  
The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday  
Year B  
Grace Church, Muncie  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Isaiah 50:4-9a*  
*Psalms 31:9-16*  
*Philippians 2:5-11*  
*Mark 15:1-47*

In the name of God: Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

*What wondrous love is this, O my soul!*  
*What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss*  
*to lay aside his crown for my soul!*

These beautiful, haunting words, flowing from an anonymous pen about two hundred years ago, are a perfect expression of our bewilderment today. After all, this is the day when we come to church expecting a parade and end up standing at the foot of the cross.

And this is only one of the contradictions we will confront on our journey through Holy Week. We will see strength concealed in humility, betrayal hidden in friendship, victory veiled in defeat, life shrouded in death, and God emptied out into human form. It's no wonder that St. Paul spoke of the cross as a stumbling block and foolishness (1 Cor. 1:23).

The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ is the central story of our faith. Today, St. Mark's version offers us a terse drama, a sort of churchy Raymond Chandler... just the facts. Facts that we know well, perhaps too well.

I sometimes wonder if, in our quest to know every last detail, we get wrapped around the axle of the facts, and the Passion narrative becomes simply the saddest story ever told.

The details of this story were written down long after the events had taken place. But a good twenty years before the Gospel writers began to stitch together the "who" and the "what" of the Passion stories, Paul is writing to the Philippians about the "why."

Paul weaves into his letter a hymn already being sung by Christians; a hymn that aches with beauty about the God who loves us so thoroughly, so deeply, that he pours himself out to be born in human likeness. Listen again.

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.*

Human likeness. Like you; like me.

In the flesh, Jesus becomes obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross, that excruciating, shameful, degrading instrument of execution. Think of it: our God, on the Cross...stumbling block and foolishness, indeed. What wondrous love is this?

With his words to the Philippians, St. Paul illuminates the Incarnation – God’s wondrous love to take on our lot and our life in Jesus Christ so that God could identify with us completely. Why would God do this? So that we might know God’s profound love for us, God’s desire for complete solidarity with us, and God’s commitment to be always for us.

But seriously...us? What the heck is going on here? Or, more beautifully, in the words of Samuel Crossman:

*O who am I  
that for my sake  
my Lord should take  
frail flesh and die?<sup>1</sup>*

Who are we, indeed? We, who one moment are shouting “Hosanna!” and the next, find ourselves yelling “Crucify him!” We, who at the drop of a hat turn from adoration to abandonment. For us? How can this be?

When I was a boy, adults always seemed to have the same answer for this kind of question: “Because.” But as Christians, we know that real the answer is “Love.” The wondrous, self-offering love of God means we never have to fear that death has the last word, or that our final fate is to be abandoned in a forgotten grave.

With all that in mind, I want to us to think for a moment about the single word that characterizes today: *Hosannah!* This morning, as we processed into the nave, we sang words from the ninth century: *All glory, laud, and honor to thee, Redeemer King, to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring.*<sup>2</sup> As I child I learned a variation of this hymn from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It begins, *Hosanna, loud hosanna, the little children sang,*

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<sup>1</sup> *My Song Is Love Unknown* (1664), Samuel Crossman (1623-1683).

<sup>2</sup> *Gloria, laus et honor*, Theodulf, Bishop of Orléans (c. 820).

*through pillared court and temple their lovely anthem rang.*<sup>3</sup> Decades of singing about those sweet little children made a tremendous impact on how I approached Palm Sunday.

But I am told by those who know such things that *Hosannah* is neither a sweet children's song, nor a biblical version of *Happy Days Are Here Again*. *Hosanna* is a Hebrew word that means, literally, "save, please" or, more formally, "save us, we beseech thee."<sup>4</sup>

*Hosannah*. Can you think of a better phrase for the times in which we live? Three years ago, on this day, we were seated in the Parish Hall, physically distanced, and all masked up for our first, very cautious gathering for worship indoors. Do remember those strange and uncertain days? And look at us now – praying and singing and eating together. And for that, we give God humble and hearty thanks for what feels like normal.

But the rest of the world is far from normal. Increasingly, we try to make our way within a culture that is built on comparing what we consume. We still cannot figure out how to live with those who differ from us without exercising the sins of hatred, and domination, and oppression. Too many of God's beloved children are caught in the weighted nets of violence and poverty, of misery and starvation. Cruelty and warfare seem to be the way the world works, frantically constructing systems where might makes right.

It feels like a tidal wave of despair, and it's easy to become paralyzed. After all, what can I do? I want to suggest that we begin by looking at the discomfort of today, Palm Sunday, square in the face. That awful stretch between *hooray* and *crucify him* is exactly the uncomfortable place in which we stand today. The work of this week begins here, at the foot of this cross, and here in heart, which we have learned is not the place of emotions, but the place of thinking and decision-making. This is personal for each one of us.

Here are some wise words from Malcolm Guite.<sup>5</sup>

Now to the gate of my Jerusalem,  
The seething holy city of my heart,  
The saviour comes. But will I welcome him?  
Oh crowds of easy feelings make a start;  
They raise their hands, get caught up in the singing,  
And think the battle won. Too soon they'll find  
The challenge, the reversal he is bringing

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<sup>3</sup> Written in 1873 by Jeannette Threlfall (1821-1880).

<sup>4</sup> Check out Psalm 118:25: *Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!*

<sup>5</sup> *Palm Sunday* by Malcolm Guite. <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/tag/palm-sunday/>

Changes their tune. I know what lies behind  
The surface flourish that so quickly fades;  
Self-interest, and fearful guardedness,  
The hardness of the heart, its barricades,  
And at the core, the dreadful emptiness  
Of a perverted temple. Jesus come  
Break my resistance and make me your home.

When the crucified and risen Lord breaks your resistance and makes a home in your heart, then you will be able to hear more clearly Jesus' promise: "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). All people. All. *Hosanna!* Lord, save us all, we beseech thee.

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When you go home today, whatever you do with your palm branch, whether you stick it behind a cross or an icon, or weave it into a cross itself, let it be for you not simply a souvenir gathering dust. Let it serve as a street sign, pointing the way forward to the way of the Cross.

Even when you don't know where the road will lead, if you follow, with faith, the signs that point to the cross, you will begin, slowly, to see the world differently. And, being formed by the compassion of Christ, you will also begin to live differently within it. Because, at the foot of the Cross, the ground is level, and we are all sisters and brothers, siblings and friends, praying with one voice to Him who has been lifted up, *Hosannah, Lord, hosannah!*

I bid you a blessed Holy Week. Amen.