

Palms and Potholes

A Sermon Preached by the
Reverend Gale Robb
April 5, 2009, Palm Sunday
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bloomington, Minnesota

Mark 11:1-11
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Mark 14:1-15:72

My friend Charlie was about four years old when he came out of Sunday School one spring morning, about this time of year, very excited about what was ahead. Now Charlie was the kind of little boy you just loved to have in Sunday School because he really liked being there – and this was long before the Rotation Workshop model! He loved the songs, and sang loudly and with great enthusiasm. He loved the stories and he did all the craft projects, and he always came out wanting to tell you about it.

That morning, when his mother asked what they had done in Sunday School, Charlie said, “We made palms!” His mother said, “That’s wonderful. Tell me what you’re going to do with them.” And Charlie said, “Well, on Palm Sunday, we’re going to march into church, waving our palms, and shouting ‘Lasagna! Lasagna!’”

Isn’t that a great story? It’s probably even better because it’s true, and I can’t get past a Palm Sunday without remembering Charlie. As the years have gone by, I’ve lost track of Charlie, but he would be well into his twenties by now. I always wonder if his mother reminds him of that Palm Sunday so many years ago.

I can understand Charlie’s unique interpretation of Palm Sunday, as I’m sure many of you can. We might remember Palm Sunday from our own childhood, the anticipation of processing into church carrying palm branches and shouting “Hosanna”, or singing, as our children did this morning. But as children, we probably have little understanding of the significance of this day.

For me, a child whose family had no connection with a church other than sending me and my sister to Sunday School, Palm Sunday was significant only because it was a week closer to Easter. That meant a week closer to being able to put on the new Easter outfit, including hat and gloves and patent leather shoes; a week closer to the arrival of the Easter bunny, a week closer to Jesus rising from the dead. In my house, it all kind of ran together – the celebratory worship that included great songs with words like “up from the grave he arose,” and the family celebration, which included an Easter egg hunt and dinner at my grandmother’s house.

As I got older, Easter never quite lived up to my expectations like it did when I was a child. I always felt kind of let down when it was over, like something else, something more should have happened. It was a long time before I realized that

what needed to happen for me was there all along, somewhere between the excitement of Palm Sunday and the joy of Easter. What needed to happen was for me to join the Palm Sunday procession and follow it all the way to the darkness of Good Friday. What needed to happen was Holy Week, when there is a shift from the palms to the passion.

Of course, there were churches that held Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services, not to mention Holy Saturday all-night vigils. At one time Good Friday was a school holiday and many people spent three hours in church, from noon to 3:00 p.m., listening to reflections on the “seven last words of Christ.” But in the little neighborhood non-denominational church we sporadically attended, or the Air Force base chapels that were often our worshiping community, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday weren’t on the worship calendar.

Those services have become more common in mainline Protestant churches today. This week we will gather on Maundy Thursday evening for supper around the tables and then move into the sanctuary for worship and communion. On Good Friday, the choir will bring us a choral Tenebrae service. Tenebrae is service of shadows, when lights dim and candles are extinguished as the story is told in scripture. It recalls the Passover meal that Jesus shared with his disciples on the night he was betrayed, and the hours following from betrayal through trial and crucifixion.

This is Holy Week, a week that will witness great hope as well as profound despair. And it begins on Palm Sunday, with a procession into the city of Jerusalem. It was the beginning of Passover, you remember, and every faithful Jew who was able would have made the pilgrimage to the temple at Jerusalem.

In their most recent book entitled, *The Last Week*, well-known theologians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, remind us that there were two processions that entered the city that day. About Palm Sunday, they write, “One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession.”¹ Because it was Passover, the time when the Jewish people celebrated divine deliverance from the oppression of the Egyptians while they were living under the oppression of the present Roman Empire, riots often erupted, and it was in the best interests of the government to make sure there was enough military presence in the city in the event of trouble.

And so, for every major Jewish festival, most particularly Passover, the Roman governor – in this case Pontius Pilate – rode up to Jerusalem from the capital city of Caesarea on the coast, at the head of an impressive display of cavalry and soldiers, armor and weapons. Arriving from the west, “Pilate’s procession symbolized and actualized Roman imperial power.”²

¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, HarperSanFrancisco: 2006, p.

2

² Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, “Collision Course,” *Christian Century*, March 20, 2007, p. 29.

Not only did the procession symbolize imperial power, it also symbolized imperial theology, which said that the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, he was also the Son of God. So right away, Pilate's procession embodied not only a rival social order but also a rival theology.³

From the east, Jesus rode into the city from the Mount of Olives on the back of a donkey, to the cheers of enthusiastic followers and sympathizers. "Jesus' procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus' procession embodied an alternative vision, the reign of God."⁴ Borg and Crossan write, "The contrast is clear: Jesus versus Pilate, the nonviolence of the reign of God versus the violence of empire. Two arrivals, two entrances, two processions – and our Christian Lent is about repentance for being in the wrong one and preparation to abandon it for its alternative."⁵

No journey is without difficulty, without bumps in the road and potholes that threaten to bring the journey to a complete stop. This journey was no exception. Jesus began experiencing the bumps in the road and the potholes almost the minute he entered the city. In two of the Gospel accounts, he ends the day by turning over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. In the Gospel of Mark, we read, "And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him, for they were afraid of him." And in Luke, "Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard."

As the week went on, it seemed that Jesus was confronted at every turn by those who were intent upon entrapping him and discrediting him in the presence of the crowds of people who were following him, listening to him, those who were spellbound by what they heard. The chief priests, scribes and elders stopped him in the temple and questioned his authority, asking, "By what authority are you doing those things? Who gave you this authority?"

There were the questions about marriage and resurrection from the Saducees, who didn't believe in resurrection and only wanted to see if they could trip Jesus up. So they posed a complicated question about levirate marriage, in which a widow, following the death of her husband, married one of his brothers in order to produce an heir for her husband, saying, "In the resurrection, whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her." Jesus replied with an equally complicated response that began by suggesting that the Saducees didn't know scripture or the power of God, and ended with the statement that God is God of the living, not the dead.

³ Borg and Crossan, *The Last Week*, p. 3.

⁴ Ibid. p. 4.

⁵ Borg and Crossan, "Collision Course," p. 29.

And then there was the deep pothole of a question about paying taxes to the emperor. "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" You remember that after a long discussion about the kind of coinage used by the empire, Jesus answered them by saying, "Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." For Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries, everything belonged to God. The implication was that nothing belonged to Caesar.

We know how the story ends, of course. The chief priests, elders and scribes wanted Jesus put to death, but were afraid to risk arresting him on the eve of Passover, because of the threat of riots. But then we turn the corner. Following the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus was betrayed by Judas, and early on Friday morning stood before Pilate and was condemned to death by crucifixion, a death sentence that was immediately carried out.

Every year, as we stand waving our palms shouting Hosanna, we are faced with the same question, the same alternative that faced those who lined the bumpy road into Jerusalem. Which procession are we in? Which procession do we want to be in? Perhaps the greater challenge of Palm Sunday is to decide where we're going to be when Jesus is betrayed and denied, when he is brought to trial, when he is crucified.

We agonize over the injustice in the world, we lament systems that treat people unfairly, that perpetuate dishonesty and greed. Will we come in the night with a kiss of betrayal or a word of defense?

We are revolted by the inhumane treatment of prisoners, offended by the racist and sexist remarks and images that fill our daily consciousness, perplexed by a dizzying array of causes and crusades. Will we take a stand or will we deny knowledge of any such evil?

We are overwhelmed by the violence that surrounds us and are rarely short of words to describe our fear and loathing for those who commit unspeakable acts of terror and violence. Will we turn away when the nails are driven into his hands? Will we do anything to stop the humiliation and scorn? Will we stay until the end?

The choice is always before us. Which procession are we in? Which procession do we want to be in? Where will we be when the procession ends? There are no easy answers. There are no easy questions. Amen.