

Sunday, March 24, 2024

Scripture Mark 11:1-11

Meditation

On this day, as we begin Holy Week, we reach the climax of the year, the axis on which the Christian faith turns. Day by day, we are encouraged to ponder what Jesus did – his acts of courage, commitment, immense compassion – and how the events of a single week from so long ago still impactfully resonate with us today. It is my custom to make this a service of Palms and Passion, as we share the scriptures of Palm Sunday and the scriptures of what took place between that day and Easter Sunday. It's reality that relatively few people will attend mid-week services in Holy Week, and so I feel it's my job to help us recall the full scope of what happened on Maundy Thursday, and on Good Friday.

If we are not sure what to make of Palm Sunday, we would only be mirroring the confusion of many of the eyewitnesses when Jesus rode that donkey into Jerusalem. Most of the crowd was seized with joy and excitement, apparently not understanding who Jesus was, all he was about, why he was coming to Jerusalem in this way, or the ominous fate that awaited him. Knowing that men who would settle for nothing less than his death were waiting for him in the city, Jesus left the relative safety of the Mount of Olives, descending past the garden of Gethsemane, where he would return to pray and be arrested just four nights later. This seems like a moment that children should be shielded from. And yet, maybe the children were the ones who got it, who somehow knew that he was the One. He had always welcomed them, in an era when children were most certainly supposed to stay quiet and out of sight. He had always said you have to become like them if you are to be used in God's kingdom. It is right that they were there, front and center.

Scripture Philippians 2:5-11

Meditation

Some Methodists might be surprised to find the so-called "Black National Anthem" in their hymnals. "Lift Every Voice and Sing" resounds with "the harmonies of liberty." Jesus wasn't campaigning for civil rights per se when he cleansed the Temple on Holy Monday. But he was acting with immense courage and strength, refusing to tolerate what was not of God. He "got in the way," using the words of John Lewis. Jesus acted, stepping boldly into the long tradition of

prophetic action in God's name that is told to us throughout the Bible. And unto today, truly the labor for God's goodness in this world is long and painful, requiring resilience and uncompromising hope, as that "nation anthem" that we just sang, composed by brothers James Weldon Johnson and John Rosamond Johnson, reminds us. "Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod." During Holy Week, Jesus's feet felt stones in the road, and his back felt the brutal lashing of the rod. "Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet come to the place for which our fathers sighed." The road ahead for most of us will be, at times, stony and long, requiring the kind of sacrifice Jesus offered, not just for us but to inspire us. We are not alone. We are never alone.

Scripture Mark 14:12-21
 Mark 14:26-46

Meditation

Some hymns are associated in our minds by their common use with particular situations. "Abide With Me" gets sung at funerals and memorial services. Henry Francis Lyte wrote its words when his health was deteriorating rapidly back in 1847. He probably wrote most of it on the day he surrendered his pastoral work in England to travel to Italy to recuperate. He died in France, along the way. Sorrow, love, and a glimmer of hope glow from the embers of this hymn. Yet it can and should be a hymn for the living. Lyte probably was thinking of that moment when the risen Jesus had caught up to the two forlorn disciples on the road to Emmaus. When they came to their village, they said, "Abide with us; for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent" (Luke 24:29). In that moment, it wasn't a lonely soul asking Jesus to stay. It was a fellowship "...for wherever two or more are gathered, I am there among them." That image of Jesus staying, lingering, and abiding is a constant in John's Gospel, in the many stories we read there of Jesus. And then, at his last supper, Jesus invited his friends to "abide in me as I abide in you" (John 15:4). He was nearing his earthy end. But the abiding is for them, for the rest of their lives, for the life of Christ's church. The final stanza of the hymn "Abide With Me" is haunting. "Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes." What is the last thing we see in this life? We hope it might be family, our children or spouse, perhaps. This hymn asks us to see the cross, the death of our Lord, God become one with us in our human mortality. Truly what comfort, what profound company we keep in the hour of death.

Scripture Mark 14:60-72
 Mark 15:1-15

Meditation

The crucifixion is the center of the Bible's plot, the axis on which God's redemptive love turns. New Testament scholar and author N.T. Wright calls it "the day the revolution began." We protestants are attached to the notion of the "empty cross," but the Bible and the long tradition of Christian prayerfulness invite us to stop, ponder, and be moved by the crucified Jesus.

If there were no lyrics at all to the hymn we just sang, its tune would itself conjure up something profound, sorrowful, and riveting. Johann Sebastian Bach was so attached to this tune that, instead of composing something new, he kept inserting it in his other compositions, such as *St. Matthew Passion*, *Christmas Oratorio*, and others. This melody and harmonies lure us in and evoke passionate grief, but then the beauty and elegance cause us to lift our heads to hope and wonder.

We might focus on the nails piercing Jesus's hands (actually wrists) and feet, or the spear gutting his side. But his head is where we see Jesus the man: his eyes showing love even as his blood is shed, his mouth dry and muttering unforgettable words, the perspiration running down his face, and his forehead creased in agony. He is our head, the head of the church, the head of the body of Christ; yet it is his head that is wounded by the crown of thorns, wounded "with grief and shame weighted down." He had no cause for shame. It is our shame – humanity's and history's – that such a holy, perfect, loving, and beautiful One would be treated so cruelly. If we gaze at that sacred head, are we shamed or redeemed, stricken or forgiven? The answer is "yes." "What thou my Lord hast suffered was all for sinners' gain: mine, mine was the transgression, but thine the deadly pain." In these words, we are reminded that we are confessing and owning that our sin, the sin of each of us, put Jesus there.

"What language shall I borrow to thank thee, dearest friend?" At the birth of your child, at the death of your parent or spouse, at any moment that is beautiful or horrific, there are no words. We say something entirely inadequate, or we just sigh. What we need in those hours is a friend who doesn't have to say a word but just clutches us in quiet, firm tenderness. Jesus is that friend, our dearest friend. It's like the way Mary cradles her precious son's head in Michelangelo's *Pieta*, just as she did when he was born. We too are invited to hold him, gingerly, hesitantly but also with all the love we can muster to cradle that sacred head, the very mind and heart of God. "O make me thine forever...Lord, let me never, never outlive my love to thee."

Scripture Mark 15:16-39