

Philippians 2: 5-11
Matthew 21: 1-11
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
April 9, 2017
Palm Sunday

Let me begin with a confession. For the first time in my ministry I looked at past Palm Sunday sermons to see if I could slip one past you. Yet as I read through those I could find, alas, none of them spoke to me. And if they don't speak to me they have almost no chance of speaking to you.

On Thursday I was reviewing the Order for Worship in preparing this message and a phrase came from the morning prayer which caught my eye and jumped into my heart. Let's go back and read the prayer together.

We praise you, O God, for your redemption of the world through Jesus Christ. Today he entered the holy city of Jerusalem in triumph and was proclaimed as Messiah and king by those who spread garments and branches along his way. Let those branches be signs of his victory and grant that we who carry them may follow him in the way of the cross, that dying and rising with him, we may enter your kingdom.

Did any line from the prayer get your attention? Here's what got mine: "Let those branches be signs *of his victory*, and grant that we who carry them may follow him in the way of the cross, *that dying and rising with him*, we may enter your kingdom.

Aha! A new word—at least to me.

Until now every Palm Sunday raises the age old conflict: the crowd proclaims Jesus king and messiah and then only a short time later turns on him and calls for his death. What ignorance! What hypocrisy! What an opportunity to feel guilty and beat ourselves up for our spiritual duplicity!

One of the sermons I consulted had to do with the Bill Murray movie, “Groundhog Day”—where this jerk of a meteorologist keeps living the same day over and over. Palm Sunday has felt that way to me.

But then comes this prayer and a door opens. “Let those branches be signs of his *victory!*” The line from the prayer invites us to see the palm branches not as signs of a gross misunderstanding and of false expectations. It is not a prelude to a *big bad thing*. Maybe it was at the time. Indeed, no doubt it was.

But this is *not* Groundhog Day. We are not condemned to rehearse the misplaced hopes and the anger of disillusionment. Holy week is not meant to be a week of moral and spiritual unrelenting self-accusation.

Instead, let these branches to be signs of his victory!

Why? Because *Jesus is risen! Easter has happened!* The branches which waved in expectation of a military and political deliverer have been transformed into branches of gratitude for a real salvation.

What an amazing transformation occurs when we enter into this procession as people who have witnessed Jesus’ resurrection! Let me here suggest some wonderful aspects of this transformation:

First, the facts do not change. We are still in the crowd hoping that Jesus will be the great political, economic and spiritual deliverer. We are still people who project our fears and deep insecurities upon a leader and are disillusioned when he fails to deliver us. If I am honest sometimes just want someone to come along and make it all better like my mother did when I fell and had a “boo boo.” I am angry that there is no one who is doing that.

No wonder that when Jesus turns out not to be that person who will make everything better we in the crowd feel betrayed and want to crucify this false messiah who has raised and dashed our impossible expectations.

Notice that, in Matthew's account, Jesus is silent. It is not clear that he even acknowledges the crowds. He is like a movie screen on which we project our hopes and fears. He is aware that our shouts of praise, "hosanna!" carry a dangerous sub-text which is "save us *now!*" In the week to come Jesus' every word and deed will refute those expectations for those who have the spiritual capacity to notice and listen to what actually is going on. Yet except for a few of the women disciples, no one will.

Imagine if this was a test of our spiritual insight and commitment to Jesus! Imagine if the only people to be saved by his death and resurrection were those who saw clearly what was going on and, like those few women disciples, accompanied Jesus and breathed through the anguish and sadness until the contractions of death subsided and Jesus stood before them newly re-born! Who of us would pass such a test? Who would remain to witness?

But in God's view this is the entire point! It was not ever Jesus' purpose during his lifetime to raise us to his standards. It was his journey to descend to where we are in all our fears and anger, our confusion and wandering aimlessly in wilderness and to join us on our journey. This is the message that Paul gives to the Christians in Philippi. Jesus relinquished all claim to be treated as God and lived among us as an amazingly wonderful but tragically misunderstood human being. He allowed us to shower upon us all of the often terrifying experience of being small beings in an infinite universe and not judge us. He allowed us to pour out upon him our angry sense of betrayal when he failed to be our earthly savior. He allowed us

to want him to be punished for misleading us and disappointing our trust. He allowed us to want him to die!

He allowed this to happen without protest and without defending himself. He allowed himself to be nailed to a cross without a word of judgment saying seven last words among them being two amazing words of grace: “Forgive them, for they know not what they do;” and, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

And then after what was only about thirty-six hours, but which felt like a lifetime, the women who had stayed with Jesus at the cross and seen where he was buried came early to the tomb to complete the rites of burial. They found the tomb empty and heard an angel tell them that Jesus was risen. He who was dead is now alive. *Spread the good news to all who called for his death! Spread the good news to all who abandoned him! Spread the good news that Jesus is alive and isn't angry at anyone—especially his fellow Jews!* He wants people to realize that he who descended to journey with us in our limited and anxious lives have nothing to fear. In him we are spiritually liberated from the fear of being abandoned, left to live and die alone. We are free from the illusion that what the material offers is what we need to be happy at the depths of our being. We are released from the idea that, if only we had more money, better jobs, better political leaders, lower taxes—the list is endless, we would be safe and happy.

All that futile imagining he has left on the cross. That is why the cross is wondrous. That is why the palms are signs of victory. Amen.