

“From Hosannas to Heartbreak”

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA*

Palm/Passion Sunday

April 5, 2009

Philippians 2:5-11, Mark 14 and 15

Our first scripture passage is from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Christian believers at Philippi, in eastern Macedonia, in northern ancient Greece. Paul had helped found the community of faith there, and he had warm feelings toward it. The letter to the Philippians is his happiest letter, but the happiness Paul feels is not based on circumstance. As one commentator puts it, “None of his circumstances contribute to Paul’s joy. He wrote from a jail cell, his work was under attack by competitors, and after twenty years or so of hard traveling in the service of Jesus, he was tired and would have welcomed some relief. But circumstances are incidental compared to the life of Jesus, the Messiah that Paul experiences from the inside. For it is a life that not only happened at a certain point in history, but continues to happen, spilling out into the lives of people who receive him.”¹

Most scholars agree that in the passage we are about to hear Paul quotes from an ancient hymn that was already being sung by the earliest Christians. The hymn was about Jesus being in the form of God and surrendering that status to take on human flesh. Paul quotes the hymn not only to point to his understanding of Jesus identity, but to encourage his hearers to model their lives after him. Listen now for God’s word in the letter to the Philippians. *Read Philippians here.*

Our second and third readings come from the Gospel of Mark. Fully a third of Mark’s account of Jesus’ life is devoted to his last week in Jerusalem, from his entry into the city in the passage Dan read at the beginning of worship, to his death on a cross. The passage we are about to hear drops us into the narrative of that last week in the Upper Room, where he has gathered with the disciples to celebrate the Passover meal (the meal commemorating how God delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt). Note how he predicts that one of the disciples will betray him, another will deny that he knows him, and the rest will scatter. We know from the rest of the story that this is exactly what they do. *Read Mark here.* The next passage shows us Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. He has just finished interrogating Jesus and knows that he has done nothing to deserve death. In fact, he tries to get the crowds to ask to set him free, as it was his practice during the festival to set one prisoner free at their whim. But the religious authorities have stirred up the crowds against Jesus. *Read Mark here.* The final reading depicts Jesus on the cross. *Read Mark here.*

The humorist Will Rogers once said, “If you don’t like the weather in Oklahoma, just wait five minutes and it will change.” Do a *Google* search, and you will find that over the years, that phrase, or a variant of it, has actually been applied to a variety of locations: Chicago, St. Louis, Texas, Michigan, North Carolina, Washington, D.C., Scotland, and Melbourne, Australia, among them. Mark Twain is reputed to have said it about Buffalo, New York and New England. But I have cousins in Oklahoma who in the past month could point to snow on the ground one day and nearly eighty degrees in the shade the next.

It is amazing, really, how quickly the weather can change in so many parts of the world. We experience it here. A cold front blows through and we go from sixty-five degrees to forty degrees in what seems like a matter of minutes. Just yesterday morning, a thunderstorm crashed and flashed its way through this area and by noon, it was bright, sunny and gorgeous. The weather is a volatile thing.

There is something about this particular Sunday of the church year that makes me think of the volatility of the weather. For the longest time in the history of the Christian church, this day was devoted solely to the celebration of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. But at some point, in the past thirty or forty years, mainline churches moved to calling this day not just Palm Sunday, but Palm/Passion Sunday. The thought behind it was that there were many people in your typical congregation who might not come to the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services during the week to follow. It would be unnatural to go straight from a triumphal entry to Easter morning without acknowledging Jesus crucifixion. So along with the move to calling this day Palm/Passion Sunday came the practice of reading at least a portion of a gospel account of the last twenty-four hours leading up to Jesus' death. So we go from cheering crowds waving palms and strewing the road with their garments to a betrayal, a lynch mob, and a scared bunch of disciples who no longer want to be associated with Jesus, and his death on a cross in the space of less than an hour. It's enough to make one's head spin.

But, honestly, isn't that the way life is? How quickly the weather can change. How rapidly the circumstances of life vary from what we might have predicted. How fickle the finger of fate can be. One minute you're sailing along, the next you are in a doctor's office or an emergency room listening to the physician say, "I'm not sure exactly how to tell you this, but." One day, you are thinking you have the world on a string, the next it can feel like the world is coming to an end. Thankfully, life is not always that volatile. But the truth is that circumstances change. People we love die, move away, or otherwise drop out of our lives. Accidents and illnesses wreak their own havoc on our plans. Jobs come and go. Stock markets don't just rise, they also fall precipitously. To put it in the words of Old Blue Eyes himself, "That's life, that's what all the people say. You're riding high in April, shot down in May."² The trouble is that it is not always immediately apparent that you'll be back on top in June.

Now there is a place for that sort of "back on top by June" optimism. It can be quite helpful, when you find yourself flat on your face, to pick yourself up and get back in the race. But Palm/Passion Sunday reminds us that Christian faith is not built on optimism, it is built instead on the faithfulness of God. It is built on the embodiment of a love which is with us not just in the best of times, but also in the worst of times. When Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, he is met with the adulation of a crowd that optimistically sees in him a Savior, but One who will save them in the way they see fit. Before the week is out, he has been betrayed by one of his closest followers, denied by another who lets fear and anxiety get the best of him, handed over by religious authorities, hung on a cross by political ones, and mocked and jeered at by a crowd, at least some of whom might have been there when he rode into the city five days before. He doesn't come down from the cross, he doesn't save himself, because that is not what he has come to accomplish. His mission isn't to demonstrate God's love of power. His mission is to demonstrate the power of God's love - a love which gets fleshed out in human beings caring for other human beings - forgiving each other, helping each other, and being present with each other even in the most awful circumstances. Jesus came to flesh out the reality of God's presence in the worst of times.

If the only way the faithfulness of God can be demonstrated is through people magically being protected from every heartbreak, every illness, every unintended consequence of their actions, then I can testify right now that God will fail that test. I have already, in seventeen short years of ordained ministry, sat beside too many hospital beds and visited too many funeral homes filled with too many devout people to believe that this is the mark of God's faithfulness. I have already seen too many jobs get lost and too many hearts get broken to believe that our faith in God or God's faithfulness to us protects us from such

things. I think, rather, that the mark of God's faithfulness to us and our faith in God is the presence of human love and support I have seen lived out in the face of the worst possible diagnoses.

The mark of God's faithfulness is in the way the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that filled Jesus on his journey to the cross, empowers ordinary people like you and me to make and deliver casseroles and prayer shawls, to spend time with at-risk kids in Anacostia, to bake brownies for Children of Mine or slap sandwiches together for D.C. Central Kitchen, or to visit with a lonely person at Chesterbrook. The mark of God's faithfulness is the listening ear offered by a friend, the hurt forgiven by a wounded church member, the vast numbers of people who commit themselves to taking care of the environment. The mark of God's faithfulness is the young person who volunteers for the Peace Corps, the person who writes a card to console the grieving. The mark of God's faithfulness is the One who cares enough for the plight of a fellow human being to actually open himself or herself up to being hurt.

Over the past four weeks, I've spent a lot of time thinking and talking about how the cross demonstrates atonement - the way it somehow makes us at one with God. I won't rehearse all of what I've said here, but will instead say that I have come to see atonement in a fresh way. What if the cross doesn't achieve our at-one-ment (atonement) with God? What if it instead reveals God's radical, incarnational, at-one-ment with us in our human pain and need?

It has been said that any theology, any view of God that does not make sense in the harsh light of the Holocaust in Europe during the 1930's and 40's, is not a theology worth having. I would agree. So I am drawn to the words of Elie Wiesel, who wrote in his book *Night* about the day when the Gestapo hanged a child in front of thousands of spectators. The child, who, Wiesel recalled, had the face of a "sad-eyed angel" was "silent, lividly pale and almost calm as he ascended the gallows." Behind him, one of the prisoners asked: "Where is God? Where is He?" The child died half an hour later, while the prisoners were forced to look at him right in the face. When the same prisoner asked again, "Where is God?" Wiesel heard his heart say, "Here He is - He is hanging here on this gallows."³

On Palm/Passion Sunday, we have more hope than that. We know that Easter will come, eventually. We know that sin, death, and even radical human evil will not have the last word. But we also know that God is with us not just in the Hosannas, but in the heartbreak. We know that God is in the gallows, and on the cross, and in the courtroom and in the jail cell and on the city streets.

*We know that God is not just in the laughter, but also the tears.
 We know that God is not just in the sunshine, but also the rain.
 We know that God is with us not just in the exceptional moments, but
 also the ordinary ones,
 But most especially when we break open our hearts to really feel.
 And we mark that by breaking the bread, and sharing the cup,
 And remembering Christ's death on a cross,
 A cross that reminds us how radically at one God is with us.
 And when we begin to understand that we will have taken on the mind of
 Christ.*

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible In Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, NavPress, 2002), p. 2135.

² You can find Frank Sinatra singing “That’s Life” on his album *That’s Life* in 1966. Kelly Gordon and Dean Kay wrote the song specifically for him.

³ Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960, Bantam Books 1982), pp. 61-62.