

The Drumbeat of Faithful Living

sermon digest

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Matthew 21:1,2, 6-9

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This is a time of high drama. As a matter of fact, if you think about it, that is the nature of our following the Christian year. We begin with Advent and the drama of the birth of Jesus and move through his life and ministry to Lent and the high drama of Holy Week and Resurrection to Pentecost and birth of the church. The pageantry of Christmas is equaled only by that of Holy Week. We begin on the high of Palm Sunday, to descend to the depths of Gethsemane, the Last Supper and the Cross. Due to the lack of special Holy Week services or poor attendance at those services, many churches observe a combined Palm-Passion Sunday in an effort to avoid people skipping from the triumphal celebration of Palm Sunday to the joy of Easter Sunday. The Liturgy of the Palms is put alongside the Liturgy of the Passion as within a single hour we go from the seeming high to the abysmal depths.

The word *liturgy* that we use to describe the flow of worship gives us a clue about our purpose today and throughout the Christian year. Taken from the Greek word *leitourgia*, it means the “work of the people.” Today and every Sunday, liturgy speaks not to our services as a spectator event, but the expectation that every service is the concentrated and combined effort of minister, choir and people to present an acceptable offering of worship to God. Throughout the year, but especially on this day and throughout this week, we are not just bystanders observing a parade, but participants, actors in the unfolding drama. We are the cheering crowd rushing to be a part of the festivities as Jesus rides into town. The shouts of “Hosanna” are not just theirs, but ours; and as the service turns dark and ominous, we become a part of the jeering mob with its shouts of “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Let us be clear. The path we are walking this morning and throughout the coming week is not a romanticized gathering around a warm, secluded table on Thursday nor a dreamy imagining a cross, as the old hymn says, “on a green hill far away.” It is about a man’s weighing the alternatives and choosing to stay the course of integrity over expediency, faithfulness over abandonment, courage over fear. It is also about those who surrounded him then and now being confronted with the equally daunting choice of whether they and we will also stay the course or settle for a safer, less troubling alternative.

Thomas Long, one of the outstanding preachers in our country today, tells of moving to Atlanta where he would become a professor of preaching in Emory’s Candler Divinity School. Moving immediately after Christmas, they had worked quickly to unload enough boxes to get them started and left others to be disposed of weeks and even months later. Opening one of those later boxes, he recalls a Christmas card falling out with the familiar words from Luke: “Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth! Good will to all people!” Reflecting on that message in the middle of Lent, he could not help but note its seeming incongruity. Christmas resounds with peace on earth and carols about the joy of Christ’s coming, but then we get busy again with life and tuck our words and carols of peace away for another year [“Season’s Greetings,” *Christian Century*, Mar 21, 2001, p. 13].

Yet, as Luke tells the story of the entry into Jerusalem, Jesus is acclaimed with the message, “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” It’s almost as if Luke drops a Christmas card along the path; and perhaps he does so intentionally. Perhaps Luke is signaling us that the words we so cheerily send at Christmas “come,” Long suggests, “with a Good Friday price.” Perhaps the angel’s cry at Christmas is more than a birth announcement. Perhaps Luke is saying that rather than peace being a warm sentiment or cozy mood, it is a command. Perhaps it signals the marching orders to which Jesus was obedient his whole life and sounds the drumbeat that must mark our own steps if we would be his disciples. Just as Jesus’ staying the course meant carrying the cross, so it is for us. It means lifting “a thousand little and daily crosses” of faithful living day by day.

This morning as the Grace Chorale lead us to revisit the seven words of Jesus from the Cross, let us hear and pray the refrain that insistently rings throughout the music: “By your dying teach us how to live.” As we enter Holy Week, let our preoccupation not be with ourselves and our schedules and whether or not we can find time for special reflection and services. Let our concern be whether we will station ourselves with Jesus’ inner circle, keeping vigil at the Cross.