

Sermon Text – Sunday, April 10, 2022 – Palm Sunday
Pastor Paula Kraus

Reading from OT: Isaiah 50:4-9a, Reading from Epistle: Philippians 2:5-11, Gospel Reading for Message: Luke 23:1-49 – Passion Sunday

This is the Sunday we expect to hear the story of Jesus' triumphal entry through Jerusalem's gates, riding on a colt. We expect to hear of the crowds shouting Hosanna and waving palm branches to welcome Jesus and we long to join them. But we know that story and of course we don't always get what we expect. The crowds on that day expected to see their King and Savior coming through the gates but they didn't get the king they expected nor the savior they wanted.

Some traditions call this Sunday Passion Sunday, rather than Palm Sunday. Maybe if we had services all through the week to fully occupy ourselves with the story of Jesus' passion, we could start with the triumphal entry but Jesus' Passion is just too important to our faith to relegate it to a Maundy Thursday service when few people are inclined to attend – or to skip it entirely and go right to resurrection. Maybe that is why some people fail to take salvation seriously, or even fail to consider what a joyous occasion Easter really is. Sure it's joyous for children – easter baskets and all, it's joyous for those who love clothes because they can dress up and show off their finery in church – one day a year – but serious joy is hard to find these days and Easter Sunday or Resurrection Sunday is probably the most joyous day in the Church Liturgical calendar. But before the joy comes the agony and that is what this passion narrative is about. These events are what the 'devil' was waiting for when he withdrew after tempting Jesus in the wilderness – looking for a more opportune time.

Our scripture begins "Then the whole assembly rose. . ." and "They began to accuse him. . ." The writer of this narrative is careful to not 'name' who was in the assembly, verse 66 of the previous chapter mentions "council of elders of the people, both the chief priests and teachers of the law met together" and I suppose we can assume that was the whole assembly. I think that has meaning – the people who initially condemned Jesus at that moment were not the usual suspects. According to Luke, it wasn't only the "scribes and pharisees" it wasn't just the "Jews" or the "Romans" it was the whole assembly. And notice in the interactions with Pilate – Pilate is speaking with not only the chief priests, but also the crowds. They insisted that Jesus was stirring up the people with his teachings.

Furthermore, they began with accusations of blasphemy but now, before Pilate, they accuse Jesus of political crimes – forbidding the people to pay taxes

and perverting the nation. It should be noted that Pilate would probably not feel his power threatened by a claim that Jesus was “King of the Jews.” Pilate might however find talk of insurrection that would challenge his authority to govern a bit threatening. Rumors of insurrection in Judea could get back to Rome and that would cause trouble for Pilate. Herod too might find a claim that Jesus was “King of the Jews” threatening since Herod’s title was “King” as Rome allowed him to govern the region of Galilee. Herod however felt Jesus was a novelty, wanted to see him perform, and mocked Jesus contemptuously.

But, they – the crowds, the assembly – brought Jesus to Pilate, then to Herod, then back to Pilate. They insisted on accusing Jesus of crimes and insisted that death should be the punishment. Neither Pilate nor Herod found any basis for the accusations but “they all shouted out together, “Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!”” Barabbas – his name means “son of the father” – was an insurrectionist and imprisoned for murder. They, the assembly of people, wanted an insurrectionist not a savior. They had the right name – “son of the father” but the wrong man. It seems Pilate knew this about their chosen ‘hero’ and wanted instead to release Jesus not Barabbas. They kept shouting “crucify him, crucify him.” They prevailed, and to keep the peace Pilate released Barabbas and handed Jesus over to them. [I wonder how long the peace lasted!]

They led Jesus away, they seized Simon the Cyrene to carry Jesus cross – now there is a picture of discipleship, carrying the cross for Jesus. And, when Jesus cautions the weeping women to weep for themselves and their children, he is warning them that if this is what happens to the innocent ones without sin [green wood] how much worse will it be for the sinful guilty ones [dry wood]. If this is what happens in the name of peace – how bad will it get for those who choose insurrection.

Now, when they reached the hill called the skull or “Golgotha” they crucified Jesus; between two common criminals. The soldiers mocked him, the leaders scoffed at him, and the people stood by watching. But, as all this was going on, Jesus forgave them, he promised a place in paradise for the criminal who recognized Jesus’ innocence. Maybe it was the darkness that overtook them as Jesus breathed his last that made the people finally think about these events. A centurion, seeing all that took place, praised God and recognized Jesus as an innocent man. And, the crowds who had gathered for the spectacle – when it was all over returned home, beating their breasts. But here’s something that stands out – “all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.” Another image of discipleship – bearing witness.

They stood at a distance watching. They – the ones who knew Jesus, the women who loved him, anointed him with perfume, sat at his feet and listened to his teachings and the men who followed him, worked with him and learned from him. They watched. Now maybe they just were so shocked they didn't know how to respond so they watched. Too bad there weren't cell phones and social media at that time because I am sure there would be LOTS of Facebook and Instagram posts of that event. Everyone standing back and 'bearing witness.'

It is part of the call of discipleship to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and we in the church must learn the message from scripture; interpreting it for our lives. We must take these images and lessons to heart and seriously consider the place Jesus' crucifixion has in our faith. So – watching and learning are two things we must do.

But here's a good question to ponder – We are in that crowd watching those events, are we still standing at a distance and watching? Are we merely watching the suffering of others, maybe pondering the meaning? "When we stay silent as the innocent suffer persecution and death, are we responsible? We betray and deny Jesus when we ignore the pain of our world. We reject all that he has done for us. Even from the cross, the one who was obedient even to death proclaimed a message of love and acceptance: "Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."¹ But we do know – we know all these things and we know the rest of the story that those on that hill, standing at a distance did not know. Yet, don't we sometimes just watch?

On Palm Sunday, I know that some of us want to be in that crowd that praises Jesus, shouts Hosanna "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" We want to watch his triumphal entry into Jerusalem – the height of his popularity. We want to be with the faithful women who stand at the foot of the cross, or weep as the soldiers beat Jesus. But we often do not recognize that the same crowd shouted – "Crucify him, crucify him" and we are part of that crowd as well.

As we enter holy week and think about this journey to the cross that begins today, we should think about our presence with Jesus as he walks to the cross. Lucy Hogan writes in a commentary on this passage – "We do not always know what we are doing, but year after year we, the followers of Jesus, walk the way of the cross so that we can learn what we must do. We make the walk so

¹ Hogan, Lucy Lind. "Luke 23:1-49, Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World" *Connections A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship. Year C, Volume 2, Lent through Pentecost*. Green, Joel B., Long, Thomas G., Powery, Luke A., and Rigby, Cynthia L. eds. Westminster John Knox Press. 2018. 136-137. Print.

that we will be able to pick up our cross and be faithful to the God who loves us into eternal life.”²

Each Christian follows Christ and discovers a time of trial – a time when it feels betrayed by people who had been our friends, denied by others, and persecuted even though we are innocent. However, the good news is that this time of trial is also a time to be faithful to the God who created us in God’s image and who loves us. We keep our eyes on Jesus, who is faithful to the end, we draw strength from those who have gone before us. We live in the fellowship of the body of Christ, knowing we are never alone in our trials. These are the things to ponder as we enter holy week and witness Jesus’ walk to that hill called the skull. It is in considering all of this, the standing back and watching, that we fully realize the cost of our salvation, and can fully appreciate the joy of Easter or Resurrection Sunday.

² IBID